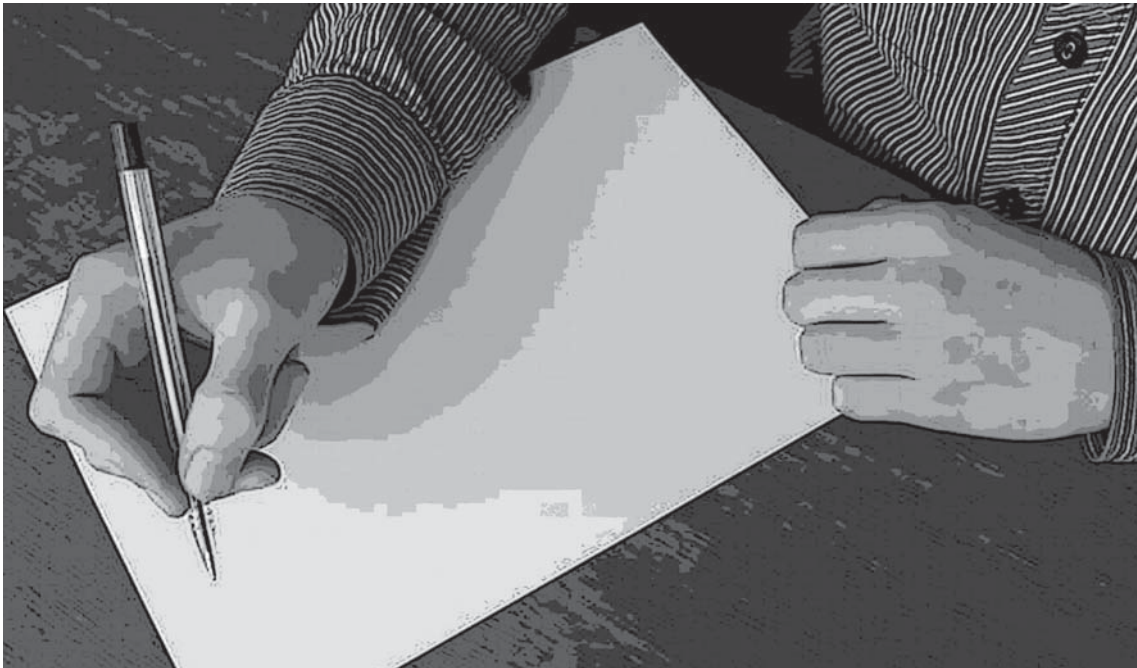


# An Open Letter to Any Parent of an LGBT+ Child

BY ELDER O. KRIS AND DEBBIE WIDMER



## Dear Parent of an LGBT+ child,

Recently and ongoingly, (Kris is a preacher and poet; so occasionally he forges new words) transgender people have been in the news. The world and national news, as well as the internal news that Adventists hear through their social media and other communication channels, have seen a steady stream of stories about transitioning people, bathroom laws, and murders or suicides of transgender men and women.

Transgender people have been in our personal news lately too—at least for the past four-and-a-half years.

We have been asked to share our experience as parents of a MTF (that's male-to-female for those who are not aware of transgender abbreviation lingo) transgender daughter.

So, in this open letter, we write/speak to any parent of a LGBT+ child (of any age), sharing with you a few of our major *decisions* and *learnings* since our child came out to us. We have a heaven-sent burden to see Christian families continue to be personable and loving units, to maintain and even strengthen the bonds of familial love, in spite of the sexuality or gender identification of their children.

You can still be a believer in God's ideal for human identities and relationships, and be a loving parent to your child (or anyone) that doesn't conform to that ideal.

Perhaps our testimony here will be helpful to you—parent to parent—as you love your children—who surely are also those for whom Christ died. We walk with you, along the path of unconditional parental love.

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### **We decided:**

1. We decided to listen. When our son came out to us, he asked us to listen to a ten-page letter he wrote and read to us sobbing. We listened, then held her close.
2. We decided to grieve. The fact is we had “lost” a son. We didn’t announce it in church and there was no funeral—but our son had “died.” Accepting this loss prepared the way for our acceptance of the new reality, so we could accept the daughter he told us she was.
3. We decided we had been placed in a “second closet” when she came out. At first we didn’t talk about “it.” To complicate matters, we are a pastoral family. Who should we talk to? How would we answer the question “How is your son?” Closets are protective, but they are dark and unhealthy places to live. So, we decided to open the door to our closet—swallow hard—and talk about “it” appropriately to others.
4. We decided to educate ourselves through reading. We searched the Internet for information. We read books. We read other people’s testimonies. We adopted an open mind on the topic and read to learn, not to confirm preconceived opinions or long-standing traditions.
5. We decided we are still a family. We decided God was calling us to live out the deepest depth of parental love. “Can a mother forget her nursing child . . . Yes they can.” Isaiah 49:15. Could we? Yes. Should we? No! We decided we would *never* emotionally or physically abandon the person that carries our genes—regardless of her gender identity or presentation; regardless of her name, clothing, hair color, piercings, or tattoos. She’s stuck with us. We’re her parents. We’re stuck with her. She is our child.
6. We decided to stay in family fellowship. This wasn’t a hard decision, but it had to be intentional. We continue to claim her as our flesh and blood—and we still want to do things together, now in adulthood. Her Master’s degree graduation happened six months after she came out. Of course, we were there. And there are holidays to enjoy, ball games to attend, dinners out together. Her sister sibling is getting married. She is included. Period.
7. We decided to continue to be parentally physically affectionate. The experts say a person needs twelve hugs a day. She probably isn’t getting that, given the fact that she’s single and transgender—so we are committed to hugging her in greeting and parting—and other times in between.
8. We decided to believe her story and experience. Rather than discounting her perspective on her thoughts about herself, we choose to take her word for it. We believe you, girl.
9. We decided to use feminine pronouns and her female name. (The name she settled on was actually suggested by her mother!) We did this out of respect for her as a person and also to communicate love and acceptance. To do otherwise; to insist on using his old name and calling him “he” may have resulted in pushing her away.
10. We decided to put ourselves in her place. What would we want from our family were we in her situation? We feel the Golden Rule applies here. We decided to model God’s grace—taught in The Prodigal Son (Luke 15). We choose to *not* give her what some felt she deserved (rejection)—but what she needed (inclusion).
11. We decided that we are not alone. So, we sought others for peer support and counseling. We heard from caring friends and family—some ahead and some behind us in a similar life journey. Out of these emails, conversations, and meals out, we found that we were “normal” in our feelings and thoughts. We found other Adventist parents who found the grace to love their children, too.
12. We decided to take a break from ministry. We took a sabbatical, and the time away from the daily grind of work gave us schedule space to deal with thoughts and emotions.
13. We decided to have a key heart-to-heart talk



with our children—individually alone and then together. This was a turning point in our family dynamics, and no one could do it but the two of us. We—mom and dad—did it together. It was transformative.

14. We decided to keep praying with and for her. God is not dead and the Divine is still at work—in our lives and her life. We lift her up in prayer daily, and when she leaves our presence, she joins us in a family prayer circle.
15. We decided to stop asking God to change her back into a him—and began asking God to change us. God has been answering those prayers.
16. We decided talking about our family was healthy. We talk about our own feelings and our daughter in appropriate ways with people we can trust. We have slowly moved from silence to advocacy for others in the LGBT community, offering love and care where we can.
17. We decided that we would stop blaming ourselves. We know it's not our fault as parents that our child has these thoughts about herself. We didn't cause this. The jury is still out on causative factors (a choice of nurture or a condition of nature?) so we have decided to blame the reality of humanity's fall instead.
18. We decided to get acquainted with her friends—other members of the LGBT community. This includes attending worships,

parties, and outings. Even a pizza night. You know—normal human kindness kinds of interactions.

### **We learned:**

1. We learned that acceptance was a harder road—but we were up for the challenge. We know we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”
2. We learned we could find peace in a new normal.
3. We learned perfect families don't exist—“You have the perfect family, a boy and a girl, and the boy is older,” someone once said. In their patriarchal world, this may be a good thing, but it hardly matters. Our family is what it is—imperfect just like yours is—and we love each other.
4. We learned that our families of origin are more gracious than we thought they might be. After she came out to the rest of the extended family, we saw them offer continued love and grace to our child. We should have known that would be the case, for they have shown grace to us throughout our lives.
5. We learned we will never fully understand what our daughter is going through. We are cis-gendered. Our brains match our bodies. Hers does not. But we learned we could have empathy.
6. We learned that all people deserve love,

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respect and all people deserve to be at “God’s table,” and not under it. We should never equate people with “dogs.”—Matthew 15:27. Jesus welcomes all to His table and offers a feast of food, friendship, and faith to each one.

7. We learned that gender identity and expression is a painful experience for a person who is transgender. It isn’t something that they choose to be hip or cool. And we need not make their life more painful. In fact, the Christian would make their path smoother and their load lighter by living out the love found in 1 Corinthians 13 and taught in the Sermon on the Mount. We choose to practice this basic Christian ideal.
8. We learned personality is not gender related. She is the same as he was. She is just as creative, messy, and funny as he ever was. She is computer savvy and still a passionate baseball fan—just like he was.
9. We learned that the brain is still the great mystery of the human body. A mass of grey, gelatinous tissue; it controls the whole of the body. It is the holy of holy of the human, if you will. And *all* aspects of brain function, chemistry and its final output in thought and feeling is still a great mystery.
10. We learned to interpret the traditional homosexual Bible passages through the interpretive lens of the ministry of the grace of Jesus. The same Jesus who loved

tax collectors, women, lepers, and the foreigner would also love the LGBT community today. By following Jesus’ example in this, we realize that we will likely be criticized the same way He was. “Why do you eat with publicans and sinners?” To that question, we will give Jesus’ answer.

11. We learned to find comfort in Bible verses not usually quoted in discussions of the intersection of faith and the LGBTIAQ community.
  - a. Luke 10:26 – When asked for a list of things or one thing to do for eternal life, Jesus asked a question back. “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” That is a key question. “How do you read it (the Bible)?”
  - b. Romans 14:5 – “Each person should be fully convinced in their own minds.” Since humanity is a glorious mix of races, cultures, perspectives, genders, etc.—there is bound to be differences of conclusions. And every person is given the freedom to think and act for themselves.
  - c. Romans 14:15 – “Do not, for the sake of your food destroy and ruin someone for whom Christ died.” We could insert any topic in the place of food. Do not for the sake of \_\_\_\_\_ destroy someone for whom Christ died. Do not for the sake of your views on sexuality or gender destroy someone for whom

Christ died! In the kingdom of grace, a person is more important than a policy, a proposition, or even a principle.

- d. Matthew 19:12 – Jesus’ mention of three types/causes of eunuch-hood deserves consideration and study. Born that way, made themselves that way, or made that way by others. Certainly people born with any difference—physical, emotional, mental, etc.—receive Jesus’ accommodation in the kingdom.
  - e. While Deuteronomy 23:1 says that the sexually injured/altered (eunuchs) were once prohibited from the entering the presence of the Lord, Isaiah 56:1–6 seems to reverse this ban! And a Eunuch was baptized in Acts 8. It seems God does change after all, allowing those who find themselves non-ideal into the ideal embrace of His love.
12. We learned that love is a choice. And we choose love. Love is drawing our daughter close, rather than pushing her away. Love is including, not excluding. Shunning is not an option for us.
13. We learned that if the family dog, Lady, could treat her the same as always—with a friendly tail wag and an eager tongue—we could follow Lady’s example, minus the wagging and licking.
14. We learned two wonderful phrases of healing, encouragement, and hope:

*“There are some things that only God knows... and They (the Trinity) are not telling.”* Life is mysterious and there many things we don’t understand. God’s ways are not our ways and our thoughts are not God’s thoughts. God’s ways are beyond finding out. Some things are best left with God.

*“We are not in Eden anymore and we are not in Heaven yet.”* We are here: outside one perfect garden, and not yet in the next perfect garden. We are trapped here—on a flawed, sin filled earth, of which we are a part. We’re all in this

together—so sinner, be kind and gentle and neighborly to your neighbor, the sinner.

And we’ll close with one additional decision: We decided to courageously use our names. Having written before with pseudonyms, this piece is signed with who we are.

We both come from families that have been part of the Adventist Church for several generations; there are accountants, teachers, pastors, chaplains, doctors, nurses, and professors in our family tree that have served God in this church for entire careers. Others, whose jobs weren’t and aren’t in denominational employ, have served this church in numerous volunteer officer roles as well. We are Adventists by faith and fellowship. And, we are a family that has LGBT members.

Our limb of the family tree includes a gay graft and a lesbian leaf and a couple of transgender twigs. (Kris, the poet, strikes here with alliteration.) And that is just what is known at this time.

We understand that the only way to end the culture of shame in the Adventist Church is to speak out and up for the marginalized members of our church.

So we say, “Love your gay and lesbian children. Love your bisexual kids. Love your transgender kids. Love your asexual kids. Love your intersex children. Love your queer child. And if you don’t have one of your own, love someone else’s. For surely, they are among us.”

That’s our story. We love our daughters. Your results may vary.

Sincerely,  
Elder O. Kris and Mrs. Debbie Widmer

**Kris and Debbie Widmer**, shown here with their daughter,



**Teagan**, have served in nursing ministry for 20 years, pastoral ministry for 35, and parental ministry for 28 years. They live, love, laugh, and love in California.

**The same  
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