

[This article first appeared in the Winter, 2012 issue of the RfA newsletter. We reprint it here, with a couple of additions, acknowledging that terms are fluid, and that not all terms are acceptable to those whom they seek to describe.]

LGBTQUIAWhat? The ABC's of Sexuality

by Rev. Stacey Midge

Rev. Stacey Midge serves as Associate Minister of Mission, Outreach, and Youth at First Reformed Church of Schenectady, NY, and was a member of the founding board of Room for All.

When I was young, “gay” was the only word I knew to describe anything other than heterosexuality. Somewhere along the line, perhaps in junior high, the term “lesbian” popped into my vocabulary as well. A little later, the concept of bisexuality was added to my frame of reference. When I got to college, “GLBT” was common parlance in some of my classes, although there was some confusion over what the “T” stood for. Currently, depending on what context I’m in, I might hear people refer to GLBT, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA...the list seems to grow continuously.

It’s no wonder, then, that when I have given presentations involving the terminology of sexual orientation and gender identity (confusing phrases in themselves), people often give me befuddled looks - even people who are advocates, allies, and members of the demographics I’m describing. But it’s important to know what we’re saying, because so much of the language used in conversations about these issues is inaccurate and often hurtful.

With that in mind, I give you this handy guide to the ABC’s of sexuality and gender. This should not be considered an exhaustive list since, as I mentioned above, the language is always being refined and new terms being coined to more accurately and compassionately describe these human realities.

Ally: a non-LGBT person who supports and advocates for the rights of LGBT people.

Asexual/Nonsexual: describes a person who lacks sexual attraction or interest in sex.

Bisexual: describes a person who is attracted to both men and women.

Cisgender: To identify as cisgender is to identify as the gender assigned to you at birth, which is the opposite of someone identifying as transgender.

Closeted / “In the Closet”: describes people who keep their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret from some or all people.

Coming Out: the process of acknowledging one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity to other people.

Gay: a person who is attracted only to members of the same sex. Most commonly used for men who are attracted to men; “lesbian” is usually the preferred term for women who are attracted to women.

Gender Dysphoria: Persistent unease and discomfort that one’s assigned gender (biological sex) does not match one’s gender identity.

Gender Expression: the manner in which a person outwardly expresses gender.

Gender Identity: a person’s way of self-identifying with a gender category, such as male, female, some combination of both, or neither. Most people develop a gender identity that corresponds to their biological sex, but many do not. Some societies have third-gender categories.

Heterosexism: the attitude that hetero-sexuality is the only valid or acceptable sexual orientation.

Heterosexual/Straight: describes a person who is only attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: describes a person who is only attracted to members of the same sex. **Homophobia:** fear of or anxiety about homosexual persons.

Intersex: a general term for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive/sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of male or female.

Lesbian: a woman who is only attracted to other women.

LGBT/GLBTQQIA: initialism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, sometimes with the added categories of queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual.

Openly Gay / Lesbian / Bisexual / Transgender: describes people who publicly acknowledge their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Outing: the act of revealing an LGBT person’s sexual orientation or gender identity without that person’s consent.

Queer: an umbrella term used by some LGBT people to refer to themselves. In the past, this term has been considered offensive and some LGBT people still consider it so, while others have come to prefer it.

Questioning: describes people who are unsure about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sexual Orientation: a person's attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex. Includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and asexual.

Transgender: describes people whose gender identity does not correspond to their biological sex. Transgender persons may or may not alter their physical characteristics through medication, surgery, or other means to appear more typical to the gender with which they identify.