

Sexual Identity

A Guide for Youth Pastors

Mark A. Yarhouse
Christine H. Hull
Trista L. Carr
Stephanie K. Nowacki-Butzen

Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity

Table of Contents

Letter of Address	1
Special Considerations for Youth Pastors	3
Be Prepared	
Practice the Gift of Hospitality	
Teaching & Curriculum	
Be Compassionate and Full of Grace	
Sexual Identity	7
Description of Sexual Identity: What is it?	
Background to Sexual Orientation, Identity	
Clinical Description	
Milestone Events	
Counseling	14
Assessment	
Diagnostic Issues	
Intervention	
New Developments in the Field	21
References	22
Other Resources Available from ISSI	23

Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity
School of Psychology and Counseling, Regent University
1000 Regent University Drive,
Virginia Beach, VA 23464

<http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org>

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<http://www.MUTEDnetwork.com>

Dear Youth Pastor,

Many youth pastors have wrestled with how to approach the topic of homosexuality or sexual identity, and many struggle with where to turn for help in approaching it. This pamphlet was written to be a quick resource for you. Hopefully it will be something that you can pick up, read, and understand easily—especially with a topic that is does not seem at all easy.

For several years now we have known that there was a need for such a resource. We have had many young people tell us that their youth pastor was the first or one of the first people with whom they shared how confused, frustrated, and/or otherwise curious they were about their experiences of same-sex attraction. And if you are picking this up to read, we assume that one of the youth you work with has approached you or might do so soon. That is why we put this together specifically for you—to answer your questions in a way that will make sense to you.

Many people contact our institute, the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity (ISSI), searching for resources. They, like you, are looking for answers. They want to know what we have learned, and are continuing to learn, about sexuality—specifically homosexuality, same-sex attraction, and ways to best navigate sexual identity questions or conflicts. This is our area of specialty, this is what we study and research.

We hope that you will find the information that we provide to be helpful. We look forward to being a resource to you.

Best Regards,

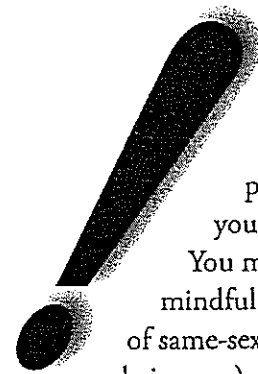
ISSI

Special Considerations for Youth Pastors

There are number of things to keep in mind as a youth pastor who may have young people struggling with sexual identity concerns. We want to encourage you to be prepared, to practice the gift of hospitality, and to use descriptive language.

Be Prepared

First of all, prepare! You are doing this right now by picking up this resource. Continue to educate yourself well and wrestle with how you can best handle this particular topic. Identify resources that would be helpful for your youth and their parents. You are a source of knowledge and support to them and they will likely come to you with questions and concerns, so...be prepared.



Part of this preparation might even mean practicing some of what you might say if one of your young people were to share with you her struggle. You might practice being empathic while also being mindful to use descriptive language about her experiences of same-sex attraction rather than prescriptive language (about being gay). At ISSI we prefer to make a three-tier distinction between sexual attraction, orientation, and a gay identity (we will cover this more in a little while).

If a young person were to share with you his sexual identity concerns, it can be helpful to acknowledge the struggle and talk about the fact that he experiences same-sex attraction. If he identifies as gay, you might at some point ask about how he came to integrate his attractions into a gay identity. This is not intended to be a point

of debate with the young person, but to open up a horizon that he may not have seen before because he may have made assumptions about an identity based upon a metaphor of discovery, which we will explain further later.

Practice the Gift of Hospitality

We often think about the gift of hospitality as being able to put people at ease when they come over to your home. But the same can be said for practicing the gift of hospitality in your relationships. What we mean by this is that it amounts to making people feel at ease in your presence. As we suggested above, this means being approachable—being someone who has the reputation of being a good listener. It also means asking open-ended questions so that you are able to “unpack” the issue being brought to you.

Also, practicing the gift of hospitality in relationships with youth also means establishing and maintaining clear boundaries. These boundaries might be physical, such as not meeting alone with a youth group member. These boundaries might also be emotional, in that you cannot do more work on behalf of the youth than the youth is willing to do. But you can be a source of information and encouragement; and you can be an extension of God’s grace in that young person’s life.

Being hospitable means making people feel at ease in your presence and not taking for granted the courage it takes youth to talk to you about their concerns.

It may also be helpful to remind yourself that a young person telling you about her struggle with sexual identity concerns is a real act of courage. Don’t underestimate what it might mean for her to share this particular issue with you.

Teaching & Curriculum

It is important to be aware of the social stigma within your youth group concerning sexuality. As such it will be helpful to approach this topic without a spirit of fear. Be aware that youth often ridicule or ostracize things and people that they fear or don’t understand. This stigma makes it unsafe for many individuals who struggle to admit or even approach the very people who are best equipped to help.

“Don’t single out homosexuality as especially bad in comparison with other teachings on sexuality.”

This is a reason why it is so important to bring things out in the open and talk about it. A positively framed teaching on human sexuality encompasses what God intends for human sexual expression. In contrast, a negatively framed teaching focuses on all of the behaviors that lie outside of God’s revealed will. We encourage you to talk about these issues within the context of a comprehensive message regarding all aspects of human sexuality. Don’t single out homosexuality as especially bad in comparison with other teachings on sexuality. Instead, teach and discuss sexuality openly with youth, and be sure to gear these messages toward youth with sensitivity and understanding as individuals within your audience may need to approach you with their struggles.

We also want to caution you not to stereotype masculine and feminine behavior in youth events and meetings. These stereotypes often indicate to individuals that there is a box that defines what it really means to “be a man” or “be a woman” and that if they do not

fit in that box, they must be something else. All too often they may turn to alternative labels to make sense of who they are. Of course, we are not suggesting that there are no definitions of what it means to be a man or woman of God. A well-designed curriculum on that topic could be a valuable resource. All too often we see that what is communicated about what it means to be a man or a woman is confused with contemporary, cultural expressions of masculinity and femininity in ways that creates feelings of confusion for those who do not meet the cultural standards. We have known young people who have turned prematurely to a gay identity because they did not feel they measured up to what it means to be a man or a woman of God.

Be Compassionate and Full of Grace

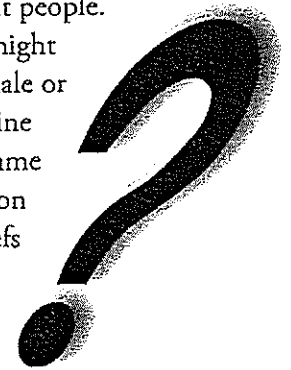
And last but not least: be compassionate and full of grace. Youth and other individuals struggling with feelings of same-sex attraction are real people—not a label—and they are sometimes living with a lot of confusion and fear. Most feel condemnation from their churches and others they know. Many times comments are made or jokes are thrown around without any intention of hurting them, but in reality it hurts these youth deeply. You can be a lifeline for them, an avenue through which they can receive both truth and the grace and love of God to give them the strength and courage to face these struggles and pursue God.

Be an extension of God's mercy and grace in the life of your youth group members.

Sexual Identity

Description of Sexual Identity: What is it?

The term sexual identity refers to how individuals identify themselves, typically with respect to their sexual attractions. Some of the most common words used today are “gay”, “straight”, and “bi”. However, sexual identity is not as simple as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on. We believe that sexual identity can be influenced by many things that mean different things to different people. Some of these things that impact sexual identity might be: biological sex (whether the person was born male or female), gender identity (how masculine or feminine the person feels), sexual attractions (towards the same or opposite sex or both), intentions (how the person intends or desires to act), values (the person's beliefs and values about sexual behavior), and behavior itself (what the person does with the intentions and attractions that person has). Essentially, sexual identity and how it forms over time can be a fairly complex aspect in and of itself—not to mention that it is combined with other complex parts of a person to create that person's entire personal identity.



Background to Sexual Orientation, Identity

Many times when people talk about someone who has a homosexual orientation they try to pinpoint why. You may have heard of the “nature vs. nurture debate”. This is the common “biology (genes) vs. environment” debate. At this point there is no conclusive research that fully supports either of these views. All of the research that

has been done up till now on the topic of how and why people have homosexual and bisexual orientations is inconclusive. Some studies are not well designed. Other studies are well designed but have not been replicated (the findings have not yet been shown by another team of researchers). And some findings may be suggestive of differences due to biology or might conversely be the result of patterns of behavior. Currently science does

Neither biology nor environment alone causes someone to have a homosexual orientation.

not know why someone ends up with same-sex attractions or a homosexual orientation. What is known is that there seems to be many reasons, which can be different for each individual.

In other words, there are multiple pathways to an endpoint. For some folks it might be that they have a “push”

from biology that when combined with life circumstances they may become curious or emulate gay role models they know or admire. This does not cause them to experience same-sex attraction; however, it may contribute to them thinking of themselves as gay and integrating their feelings toward the same sex into a gay identity. Others may get there by a different set of circumstances. We know a teen who says she grew up in a home that was not stable, and after her mom and dad divorced and because of some of the abuse she went through, she did not feel attracted to the opposite sex. The point is that each person has a different set of circumstances in his or her life that have varying meanings for the individual. But in all honesty, no one really knows how or why a person has attractions to the same sex or has come to develop a homosexual or bisexual orientation. So, we are not going to focus on trying to give you the final word on how someone in your youth group got to where they are today.

Now that you know what sexual orientation and sexual identity are, let us tell you why we talk about sexual identity and not sexual orientation. Sexual orientation tends to refer to consistent (regular) and persistent (continued over time) attractions that a person has. At this point we do not feel there is adequate research to support saying that most people can change their orientation (the most optimistic research out there says there is about a 30% chance of positive results from trying to change orientation, but those positive results were not the same for everyone and may not have always been change of orientation). Focusing on changing orientation can be pretty draining for some people, particularly if they have already tried to change or have been praying for change and are getting discouraged. We also do not want people to think of it in “all or nothing” terms—as in they either experience change or they identify as gay.

This brings us back to sexual identity: We can help young people sort through the concerns that they have and help them figure out how they want to live their lives. We can help them pull all of the parts of their identity together in a way that makes sense to them and falls in line with their values and experiences. Sexual identity takes sexual orientation into consideration along with all those other things above. Some people decide that since they have a homosexual orientation they will take on a gay identity; they essentially integrate their feelings of attraction to the same sex into a gay identity. Others feel that even though they have these attractions and orientation there are other things in their lives, generally their religious beliefs, that are more important to them and they decide to not take on a gay identity. Deciding on whether to adopt a gay identity or not (and deciding what the word “gay” means to them) is what we want to help people figure out.

Clinical Description

Many individuals who find themselves having same-sex attractions experience confusion. However, some may not have any confusion about their experiences and just need to know where to go from there. Others may have internal conflict because of their religious or cultural beliefs or values. Someone else might experience something completely different. Each person is unique in his or her situation but most have some similar experiences as others.

Many of the people who end up incorporating their attractions into a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity say that they have good relationships, are able to get and keep good jobs, do well in school, and so on. However, researchers have found that there are more instances of individuals who identify as gay (when compared to those who identify as heterosexual) experiencing depression, anxiety, and other negative emotions as well as being at a higher risk for substance misuse, contracting sexually transmitted infections, and so on. Many professionals today believe that the higher rates of negative emotional experiences like depression, anxiety, and suicidality are due to the way society disapproves of homosexuality. They go on to say that if society would change the way it views homosexuality and accept it then these rates would be no different than those of the general population. People who take this view might say that helping people identify as gay publicly might be a positive thing in that they will have access to some support that they might not otherwise have. However, public identification as gay may also put them at risk for more discrimination and may further an identity that for some people may be premature.

Another important area to consider is that of non-monogamy and relationship instability. Research has found that non-monogamy is more common for gay males. Some people say this is true because of a lack of social support (like gay marriages not being accepted in most places). Others talk about a real difference among individuals who identify as gay in that they

can be committed to emotional faithfulness but not physical or sexual faithfulness.

Researchers are finding trends in the ways that individuals who identify as gay experience their lives from an emotional and relational standpoint.

And once they find these trends they then have to try to explain why they are finding what they are finding. Whatever the causes, it is likely that young people who experience same-sex attraction, even if they have not chosen to identify as gay, are having some negative feelings and may possibly be having difficulty in relationships. As a youth pastor you can begin to see why it is important for young people to have others around them who they can talk to—people they can trust. Youth pastors have an opportunity to be a tremendous source of support. Other key people include parents, siblings, friends, and counselors.



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Milestone Events

Milestone events are major events that, when people look back at their lives, can be seen as markers or signposts in their lives that carry meaning. We understand that each person is unique, but we are trying to provide a young person with the best understanding of key milestone events for the majority of individuals who are in the same boat as he or she may be. We believe that young people are in a time of their lives when it is common for people to search for congruence—they want their beliefs, values, thoughts, behaviors, and desires to line up and have some semblance of order. Often, people who are having similar experiences are also starting to look for and give meaning to their lives in relation to their identity—including sexual, religious, and cultural identities.

The general consensus is that in this process individuals follow a progression that looks like this: (1) awareness (typically of feeling “different” than others and this is typically tied to attractions toward the same sex), (2) engagement in same-sex behavior, (3) labeling oneself as homosexual, (4) disclosure of a gay identity to others, and (5) relationship with another member of the same sex. Table 1 outlines the average ages at which an individual may work through the process of sexual identity development.

Although the people in these studies state that they experienced same-sex attraction at a young age, most do not label themselves as gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual for many more years to come. We have found this to be particularly true when we have looked at religious identity as a key factor in a person’s life. The beliefs and values these individuals hold may delay decision-making about sexual identity for longer. In any case, most people move through cycles of confusion,

denial, minimization, frustration, and fear before even acknowledging their struggle to anyone else or settling on a sexual identity.

Table 1. Average Age Range in Years at Time of Milestone Events

Population	Awareness	SSB	Label	Disclosure	Relationship
Christian*	11-14	15-18	17-19	17-19	17-19
Gay Identified**	8-11	12-15	15-18	17-19	18-20

Note: Awareness = first awareness of feelings of same-sex attraction (SSA); SSB = same-sex behavior; Label = first labeling of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; Disclosure = first disclosure to another person; Relationship = first relationship with the same sex. Many participants in the Yarhouse et al. study did not engage in SSB or label themselves as gay despite reported SSA. But for those who did, we report the average age of milestone events.

* Study of Male and Female Christian Young Adults by M. A. Yarhouse, S. Stratton, J. Dean, & H. Brooke, “Sexual minorities: Christian college students and their sexual experiences.” Executive Summary Report, Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, 2007.

** Study of Male Gay Identified Young Adults by E. M. Dube and R. C. Savin-Williams, “Sexual identity development among ethnic-minority male youths,” *Developmental Psychology*, 1999, Vol. 35, No. 6, pp. 1389-1398.

We have found that as young people struggle with feelings of same-sex attraction and how to make meaning of them, they often reach out to a select few for support. Most often, they will disclose first to close friends. After these friends they will most often disclose to trusted adults like you as their youth pastor, or they might also talk to counselors or teachers. They might also share with a sibling. The third group of people these youth often tell are their parents. So it is important to understand that you may be learning about the young person’s experiences and dealing with your own reaction while they have been struggling with it for several months or even longer. It is also important to keep in mind that they very well may not have yet told their parents.

Now, you may be asking yourself what would it mean for a young person in your youth group to “come out” to you. We at ISSI talk about coming out a bit differently than you have probably heard of before. Typically in the gay community coming out is treated as synonymous with identifying oneself as gay. Most of the time when people in the gay community talk about homosexual feelings or same-sex attractions, they tend to lump it into one category and simply say a person is gay. It ultimately equates the person’s feelings of attraction with his or her identity. But that isn’t accurate in our experience. We find it much more helpful to talk about a person’s experiences of same-sex attraction rather than identity. So we think of coming out as finding safe people with whom a young person can share the fact that he experiences attractions toward the same sex.

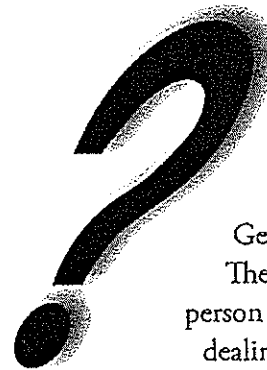
As with anything that’s really complex, it is impossible to say that the young person in your youth group is going to go through the same milestone events in the same order as other people who experience same-sex attraction. But it can be helpful to see general markers that may carry meaning for him or her.

Counseling

Assessment

We are now going to turn our attention to counseling. Many people find it helpful to talk to someone about their sexual identity, and the person in your youth group, or his or her parents, may decide that meeting with a counselor is a good next step. In this section we will discuss what someone might expect from counseling, how a counselor might work with a young person, what topics a counselor might talk about, and so on.

If a young person were to go to see a counselor she would probably go into the office for an initial interview before starting any kind of therapy. This is called an assessment. This interview asks questions to best understand who she is, where she has been, and what she is going through. It is similar to a conversation with a medical doctor who is doing a check up asking about all facets of her life. The difference is that this interview looks at a number of factors that might figure into her concerns. This helps determine what the primary issue is and helps the counselor see the big picture—which may include any other issues on top of what the young person thinks the problem is. Like we mentioned above, these other problems are sometimes part of a person’s experience and can take the form of symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.



Generally a counselor is supportive and encouraging. The counselor will talk about the things the young person wants to talk about, but because the issues he is dealing with are so controversial each counselor may respond differently—in ways that he or she thinks are in the young person’s best interest. Some may choose to focus more on his other concerns than on the fact that he is concerned about experiences of same-sex attraction.

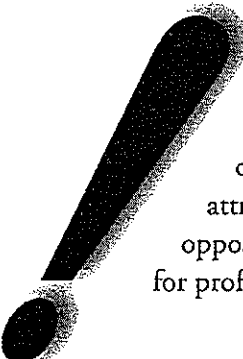
Here at ISSI we would encourage a counselor to undertake the same general process described above. We believe this can help create a plan for counseling specifically suited to the young person’s needs. We encourage counselors to use some kind of measure of a person’s quality of life so she can share her overall satisfaction with how things are going, as well as reflect on specific areas so that we can get an idea about a range of issues in her life. We also encourage counselors to get more information on a young person’s sense of her own sexuality, as

well as messages she has heard at home, from friends, and from the media about sexuality. Counselors should also ask this person about how much attraction she feels toward the same and opposite sex.

These tools and many others have been developed to help people create a language for what they have been experiencing and working through. ISSI counselors will typically avoid making judgments about what is normal and abnormal. They will instead work to help people, in a sense, reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and values, and help them find the language to tell their stories. This will help them understand how language shapes their perspectives and their views of the world. We would encourage a counselor to then help them work through how and what language best captures their experiences.

Diagnostic Issues

Something to keep in mind while you are reading all of this information is that homosexuality is not considered a mental disorder by the major mental health organizations. Prior to 1973, mental health professionals had a diagnosis in their manual of mental illnesses that stated homosexuality was a disorder. But that is not the case any more. Even though people have these attractions and



may have sexual encounters with someone of the same sex, this does not mean that they are mentally ill. However, if people have same-sex attractions and are experiencing conflict, confusion, or frustration because of those attractions, or because their religious convictions oppose same-sex sexual behavior, then there are ways for professionals to understand their experience.

One of those diagnoses in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) mental health professionals can use to make sense of these types of situations is Sexual Disorder NOS (not otherwise specified). This category can be for a number of concerns, including “persistent and marked distress about sexual orientation.” Essentially this means that people are troubled by their sexual attractions and/or orientation. The other diagnosis that talks about the problems they might be experiencing would be called an Identity Problem. This one is used when people are uncertain about more than one of the key areas of their identity, like their religion, sexual orientation, being an adolescent, which group to belong to, moral values, etc.

Since 1973, homosexuality has not been considered a mental disorder by the major mental health organizations.

A young person might receive other diagnoses if there is more going on in his heart and mind than just being confused or troubled by sexual attractions or orientation. If he is more sad or anxious than usual he might be diagnosed with a disorder that takes into account depression or anxiety. It is pretty common for people who have same-sex attractions or a homosexual orientation to experience such negative feelings, or even to struggle with substance use (e.g., nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, etc.). Some people say he might have these other concerns because of rejection he might feel from others or because these are the ways he copes.

Intervention

After the information gathering part—the assessment phase that may lead to a diagnosis—counseling moves on to the intervention stage. If a counselor were to address a person’s concerns over same-

sex attractions instead of just treating the other issues she might have, there are a few different ways that a counselor might work with her. Many counselors do a supportive approach and may think of the young person as essentially gay, encouraging her to think about herself in that way. This is called “gay affirming” therapy or what we refer to as “gay integrative” therapy. We call it this because it would essentially assist the young person in integrating experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity.

Other counselors might recognize the young person’s religious conflicts and assist him in stopping behavior that might place him at risk for STDs or some other concerns. We talk about this as celibacy-based therapy or chastity-based therapy because the focus is on changing behavior. Changing behavior may be helpful because of health risks associated with sexual behavior outside of the context of a monogamous relationship. There may also be benefits with delaying sexual behavior insofar as behavior may lead the young person to claim an identity earlier than he otherwise might.

Some counselors might recognize a person’s conflicts and offer counseling (or a referral to another counselor) intended to change her sexual orientation. This type of counseling is currently controversial and many mental health organizations have expressed concerns about it, suggesting that sexual orientation cannot change or that it might be harmful to attempt to do so. The research here is again not

“ The focus of sexual identity therapy is to help young people figure out how to live their lives in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and values. ”

particularly well-designed, but some studies do suggest that some people report a change in their behavior and (in some cases) their own sense of their orientation. The research on potential harm in trying to change is also poorly designed. Some people have said it was harmful to try to change; others have said it was helpful.

Still other counselors might focus more on a young person’s sexual identity, much like we do here at ISSI. The focus of sexual identity therapy is to help young people figure out how to live their lives in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and values. Put differently, we essentially assist young people in helping their behaviors and identities line up with their beliefs and values. This approach also considers how they identify themselves and their sexual preferences privately (to themselves), as well as publicly (to others). In this approach we would encourage young people to move towards congruence between their values and actions.

We help young people reach congruence by having them think about the messages they have received about same-sex attraction. We talk to them about how various stories have been told to them and how these stories came to make sense to them. For example, one of the main metaphors young people might hear today is the *discovery* metaphor. The message in this metaphor is that a young person already is gay, and that he is coming to discover this about himself. In contrast, the *integration* metaphor acknowledges that he experiences same-sex attractions but suggests that what matters now is what he does with the attractions he has. A young person can integrate them into a gay identity, or he can decide not to. We also know some people who decide to identify as gay, but they transform the meaning of the word gay because they choose not to engage in same-sex behavior. Keep in mind that the popular meaning of “gay” suggests behavior—that attractions lead to behaviors, which express who you “really are”.

Some people decide that “gay” means that they have these attractions but they decide not to engage in behavior for personal or religious reasons.

In the end we would want to work with young people on writing a story for each of their lives—a story regarding their behaviors and their identities that is more congruent with their beliefs and

It is a challenging process to make meaning out of same-sex attractions and experiences...but new language and insight can be helpful.

values. To do this we would highlight the meanings that they are making out of the fact that they are attracted to the same sex. Do their attractions mean that they are different kinds of people—and is it best to distinguish types of people based upon their feelings of sexual attraction? Or do their attractions exist but not make up who they are as a person? And there are many other

possible ways to make meaning that might shape their overall sense of themselves and their identity. But in the end, they get to decide how to edit the stories of their lives based on what they believe, their values, how they feel about their sexuality, and how they want their lives to proceed from this point on.

All of this can be a pretty challenging process, no doubt. But counseling like this not only gives people a new language and insight for managing their sexual identity, it also transforms how people look at their lives as a whole.

New Developments in the Field

In many respects the study of sexual identity development and synthesis is a relatively new and exciting area of research. Many models exist to try to explain how sexual identity develops over time among people who experience same-sex attraction. Yet we continue to learn so much by conducting research in this area. Several research projects are underway through ISSI to further our understanding in this area. ISSI will be disseminating research and practical resources as they are developed. It is also important that individuals and families affected by sexual identity concerns continue to be aware of developments in this area. Individuals, families, and other stakeholders, such as youth pastors willing to participate in ongoing research projects (involving sexual identity development and synthesis, religious coping, sexual identity therapy, and so on) taking place at ISSI should contact the following address:

Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity
Mark A. Yarhouse, Psy.D.
Regent University, CRB 161
School of Psychology and Counseling
1000 Regent University Drive
Virginia Beach, VA 23464