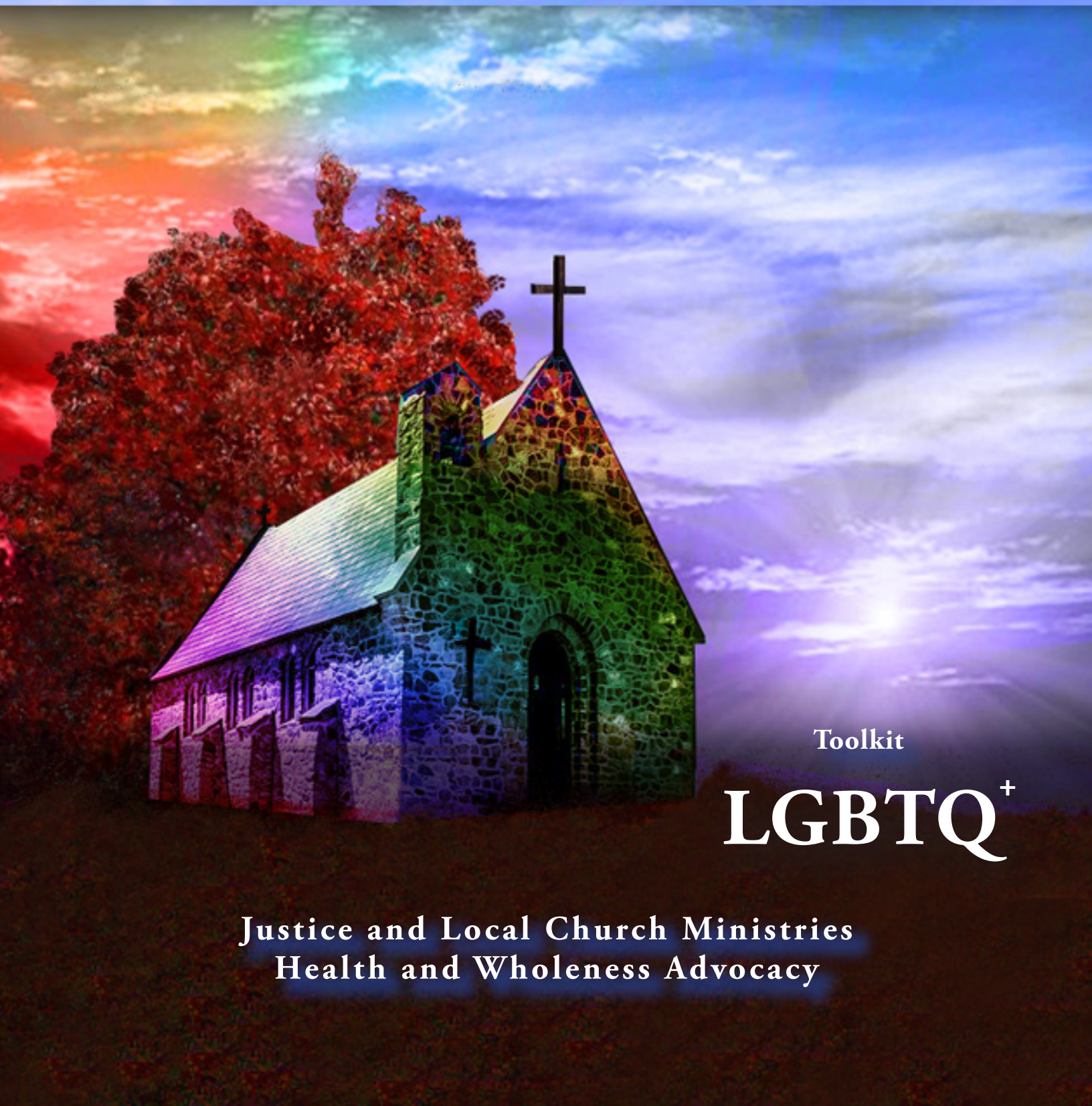


Encuentros de Gracia y Bienvenida

LGBTQ+ Welcoming in our Faith Communities
in the United Church of Christ



Toolkit

LGBTQ⁺

Justice and Local Church Ministries
Health and Wholeness Advocacy



*Founded through a generous grant from,
The E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation*

Co-Editors:
Proyecto Encuentros Advisory Committee,
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INTRODUCTION

“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!” This refrain is often heard at the commencement of Sunday worship in United Church of Christ congregations, especially those that have a covenanted understanding of their role as Open and Affirming congregations. But what does it mean? Who are we welcoming? And who might still be feeling left out?

For many who identify as “other,” the idea of being welcome in a church as fully human, beloved by their Creator, feels like an unreal comedy of errors. If they are welcome as Latinx, they might be excluded because of their sexual orientation or their gender identity or expression. If they are welcome despite or because of who they love, it might be that their ethno-racial and cultural identities become a reason for exclusion. And so, they are left wondering what to do with the languages of their hearts, their music, and theological understanding. Where is God amid the “almost welcome”?

Has your congregation gone through the process of becoming Open and Affirming? Have you revisited your covenanting statement? We wish we could say that this toolkit will answer all these questions and more. The truth is that new questions may and, in fact should, arise from digging deeper into the idea of God’s extravagant welcome.

These testimonies are designed to be starting points to create an extravagant welcome for all. There will be days when you feel great about the way you have welcomed others into your midst and days when you kick yourself, thinking you could have done better. God is with you in each instance. Keep practicing!



To keep in mind when using this information:

The following testimonies are intended to spark conversation in our faith communities. We ask that you engage this material in love, humility, curiosity and respect.

Remember, the mission of the United Church of Christ states: “we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.”

Love: In the way Jesus has loved us, we are called to love one another.

Humility: Realize we learn each day and throughout our lives. We don’t know everything and that is the beauty of life; we can always learn if we are open and humble.

Curiosity: Actively engage with the material; ask questions in a sincere effort to learn from one another.

Respect: Seek to see the divine in these testimonies, to hold them as the truths for your siblings. Remember, they have opened themselves to share their painful and joyful experiences as “the other.”

Read each testimony, and take time to understand their depth. After each reading take the time to pause, reflect, and learn.

Tips for Facilitators

Materials

Suggested Time for discussion:

90 minutes

- Easel paper
- Markers
- Sticky notes
- Pens
- If you want to show the video clip found in the reading “How to be an ally,” you must have a projector and a computer.

- If your group is more than 10 people, you may want to break the group into smaller teams of 4-5 participants.





When I Felt Welcome! Rev. Justo González II

I'm a Newyoricán. I was raised fully Puerto Rican, fully immersed in a New York City neighborhood. I learned many things from my dad and the macho-dominated culture within my Latinx community. I learned that education is good. I also learned words that were bad even if (at the time) I did not fully understand them.

Words like:

- “Fag” (Pato): What’s that?
- “Faggot (Maricón)”: Another beautiful word [note the sarcasm] for anyone who did not live or embrace heteronormative expectations.
- “Those People (Esa gente)”: What people?
- “That guy is a bit weird”: I was beginning to understand...
- “You have to be a man!”: Duh, I have all the right plumbing. Oh, it’s not about your sexual organs? Ah, it’s how you use them...that makes you a man or not.
- “Those fags should die (Esos patos deben morir).”
- “Those ‘odd folk’ will go to hell. They deserve it.”

As a child, I began to notice that I got excited being around other boys. Girls did nothing for me. Boys brought a tingle to my life, an excitement. Santa Maria, Madre de Dios, this can't be!

This is unacceptable. Panic became my life. I thought that I might be a "pato." I worried that my family, especially my father, would hate me. Others might kill me. I was violating the cultural expectations of being macho. But I had learned that "macho" meant you tell your wife you love her, then beat her like a wild animal. It means you have concubines all over the place. I didn't want to be macho if it meant those things.

I got one clear message: "Don't let anyone know you're having these feelings. Hide. You ARE unworthy of your Puerto Rican race." Once I had my first encounter with a man, I knew I was gay. It was exciting and yet I cried all night. My father, my culture, my church had already taught me I would be condemned to the pits of hell.



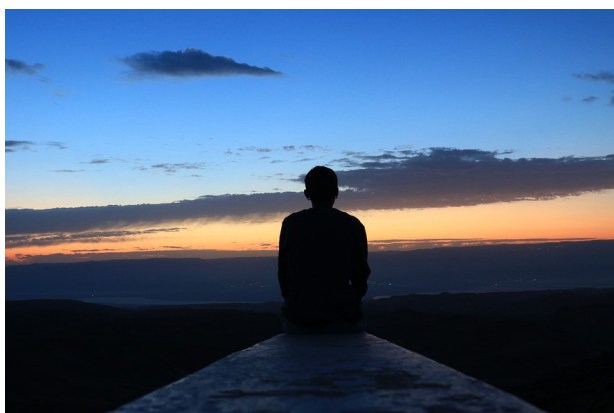
How could this be? I was still the same Justo. I was kind, loving—I believed in God. I longed to follow Jesus and knew, since the age of 13, that I was called to ordained ministry. I asked God to take this cup from me but God did not. Even in college I could not let anyone know my deepest secret.

I've come to learn that I am fully created by God and celebrated as a gay Latino male, as a pastor and as spouse to my husband James.

My father died without us ever speaking to each other about what we both knew. I liked men as much as he liked women. I never dared say, "Papi, soy hijo de Dios, tu hijo y gay" (Dad, I am a child of God, your son, and I am gay). I simply did not know if I would be rejected (tears still flow down my face), embraced, or if he would do what many Latinx parents do: avoid the conversation altogether. Or maybe the truth is that I never trusted myself to speak my truth to him. Even as I held his hand, I forgave all of his inconsistencies and blessed him to eternity.

Mom looked at me one day and brought up the subject. She sat me down in my kitchen and blessed me, saying: "I have always loved you and always will. You are to love and take care of each other. I love you both." My uneducated Puerto Rican mother, who was taken out of school by her father in the 3rd grade so that her brothers could go to school, blessed me. She saw me. Words alone cannot express what that blessing meant. My tears (shedding them as I write), speak to the power of love and to the power of being seen.

Mom didn't need me to play the facade game like my dad. She just wanted her baby boy to know he was loved. It was one of the most powerful acts of love that I have received. She passed away within two weeks of giving me that lifelong blessing. My mom, like maybe some of you, didn't fully get what this same gender love thing was; she didn't have to. She simply focused on love. Her church had taught her that being gay was a mortal sin. She didn't care what the church said because she saw me. She saw me and knew me.



Sacred friend, place your ideas aside and come meet us, your sisters, brothers, and siblings in that sacred place called love.

I wish you well as you journey to understand what may be outside the realm of your experience and comfort level. Please don't let the next little one, who discovers his/her/their true self, have to go through the pain I went through, of which I am still fearful.



After reading this testimony, we suggest that the group facilitator lead the discussion of the topic as follows:

- Lead the group in a brief breathing exercise (inhaling and exhaling at least 3 times).
- Ask the participants to write down their initial thoughts and questions.

Then, have them discuss the following questions in groups of two or three:

- How was Justo able to find peace?
- How was God moving in his life?
- Why was it important for him to be welcomed by his parents?
- What can we do in our group to practice unconditional love?





Crossing Gender Borders Pastor Yadi Martínez-Reyna

“But he said to them, not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” Matthew 19:11-12 (NRSV)

Imagine that a young girl is with their mom in a fabric and seam shop in downtown Brownsville, Texas. The mother asks, “What fabric would you like?” The times when my mother and I went shopping are some of my most precious memories. At that moment though I was internalizing a frustration and guilt that I could not explain. I knew I should be grateful that my mother spent hours sewing my dresses and skirts that were prudent and worthy of me, the temple of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 6:16). That’s how my life was until my mother entered the hospital and died a year before I graduated from high school.

Some time had passed since my mother had died when my father stumbled across a notebook I kept where I had written on how to live a righteous life before God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission (1 Timothy 2:11-14). A woman must not wear men’s clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5). It is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut (1 Corinthians 11:6). And these are just some examples of an extensive list that in my youth I followed. I believed that I needed to learn to be a virtuous woman (Proverbs 31:10).

Although my father was not religious, he would let me go to church. However, after reading my notebook, we both decided that it was best I stopped going. With his support, and the restlessness that my mother had left me about how the love of God was more than memorizing Bible, I left behind that way of living.

At the age of eighteen, my father took me shopping at a clothing store. And not only that, but he took me to the men's department where he gave me my first cargo pants, a pair of blue jeans, a cowboy belt, and boots. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had found myself. I felt such happiness. Yet at the same time, I felt a deep sadness because I knew I had disappointed my aunts, and I had left the community of faith where I grew up. Today, I understand that this norm and way of living works for some people, but for me, it had oppressed my self-expression and extinguished the flame within.

This past year my father passed away and among his things I found that notebook I speak of. I also noticed that at the end of my notebook, I had written the biblical passage of St. Matthew, where Jesus talked about the eunuchs. Perhaps at that time I did not understand, as I do today, why I wrote, "This is the love of God," next to this passage. Although it was a decade before I publicly admitted I was a gender non-conforming, androgynous individual, my father unknowingly liberated and opened my mind with endless possibilities.

When Jesus spoke about the eunuch in Matthew, he did not deny them the kingdom of God, but instead, invited others to understand how all are welcome (Matthew 19:11-12). This is why it is imperative to share with our community that they can find peace. For in our bodies we show the essence of God's love and the transfiguration that happens in our lives. It is my prayer that we see how, biblically, we are asked to do justice, love mercy, and to clothe ourselves with love, for perfect unity (Micah 6:8, Colossians 3:14). In the end, it truly is biblical that may we love each other (1 John 4:7-12).



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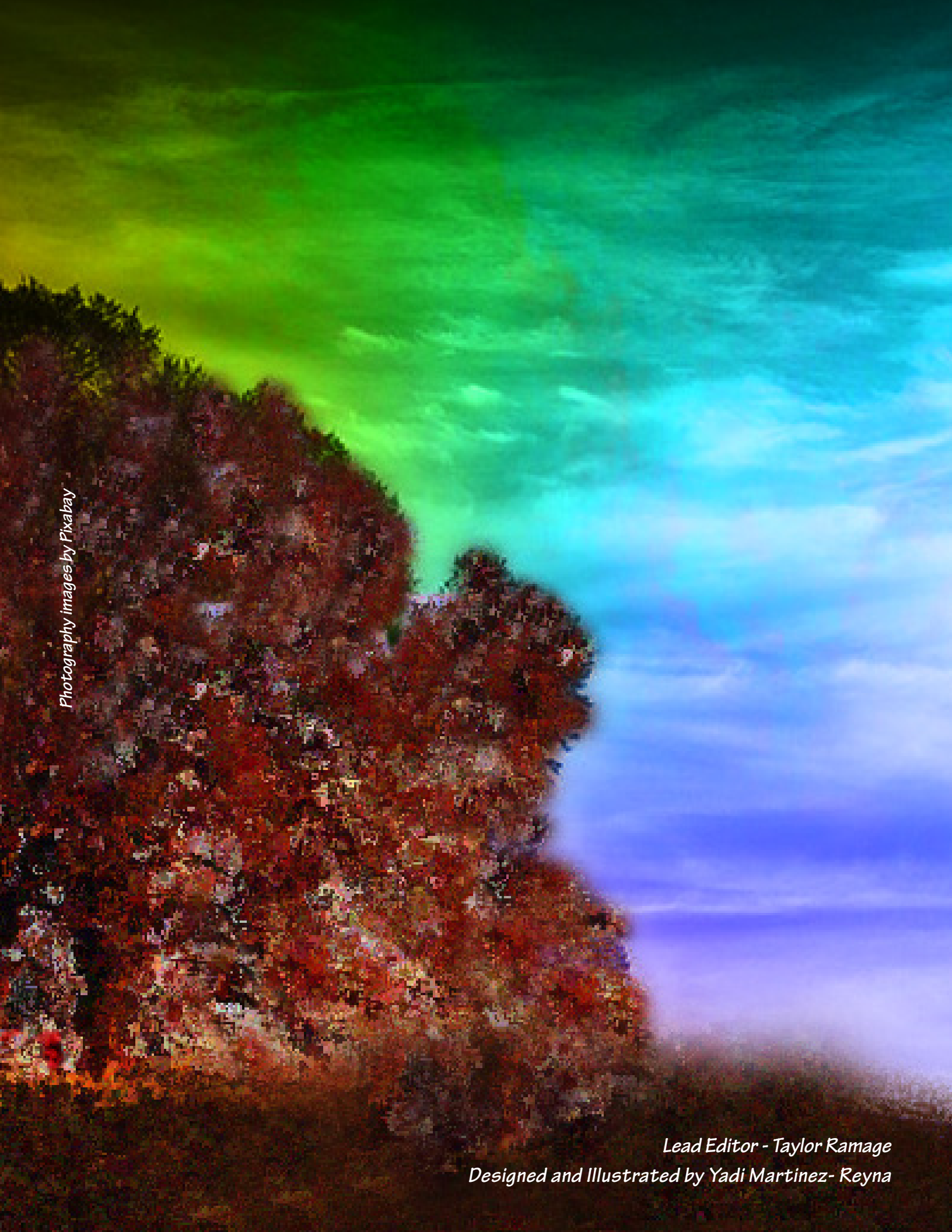
Then, have them discuss the following questions in groups of two or three:

- What shaped Yadi's views about gender?
- How did they really feel?
- Why was their father's acceptance and reassurance key for them?
- What can we do in our group to practice unconditional love?

Let's put a stop to transphobia:

- ▶ **Avoid asking personal questions** about a person's genitals, surgeries or sexual activity.
- ▶ **If you don't know a person's pronouns, ask!**
- ▶ **Don't encourage or promote stereotypes** about transgender people.
- ▶ **Educate yourself** about the struggles of the trans community.
- ▶ **Respect the pronouns and names** used by a trans person, **and use them to refer to them.**





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