AFTER THE FACT:
REDUCING THE RISK OF SUICIDE
AMONG SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

WALLINGFORD UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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A resource for teaching, preaching and intentionally extending Christian compassion to all people impacted by the alarming connection between teen sexual identity and suicide risk.
Introduction: Why This Study?

Recently a well-known artist used the following question to help guide her in prioritizing the selection and arrangement of her work: “If not now, when?” That question can help guide us as we sort through the questions and concerns we bring to this issue. More importantly, “If not now, when?” also keeps our study focused as we address our own timely and thoughtful Christian response—how are we to act now? For it is our actions that will truly express our faith and understanding.

The very title of our study, After the Fact, is intended to convey the twin aspects of our goal. Here’s what we hope to achieve as we go through this process together—in large or small groups, in classrooms or a retreat setting:

- To confront the facts of the matter: What can we learn about the reality of GLBT teens and their vulnerability to suicide?
- To move toward our own plan of action: What can we do to spread awareness and help toward prevention?

We aim to be after the fact(s)—in terms of sorting through the data and putting it all together, and we’ll do this using the whole of our Bible and our brain, the whole of our heart, mind and imagination. At the same time, we are determined to act now—before more GLBT teens feel compelled to take their own lives. Because waiting to address this issue until after the fact (until one of our loved ones becomes such a statistic) is far too costly a delay. “If not now, when?”

An appendix to this study is provided in order to direct individuals and groups through the process in a variety of time formats and place settings, from a one-time hour-long Sunday School class to a 3-week Christian Education program; from the classroom to a retreat setting. The appendix also features additional resources for further study and action.

This study was initiated by the leadership, members and friends of Wallingford United Methodist Church in Seattle, Washington. It was submitted and later approved by the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference as follows:
Implementing the General Conference Resolution on

“Teen Sexual Identity and Suicide Risk”

Be it resolved that the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference endorse “After the Fact: Reducing the Risk of Suicide Among Sexual Minority Youth” as a resource for teaching, preaching, and intentionally extending Christian compassion to all people impacted by the alarming connection between teen sexual identity and suicide risk. The Conference hereby commends this resource to local congregations, pastors, and annual conference staff, particularly those who work directly with youth and families. Furthermore, the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference petitions the General Conference of The United Methodist Church to adopt this resource as a good faith effort to begin to live toward the commitment made by the General Conference in 2004, as found in “Teen Sexual Identity and Suicide Risk,” resolution #158 of the Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church – 2004 (p. 410).

Explanation: The General Conference of The United Methodist Church in 2004 voted to “establish and fund a task group which will” publish a summary of current research, provide resources for ministry, and make recommendations for further legislative and program priorities to address the connections observed between teen sexual identity and suicide risk (Book of Resolutions, #158, p. 410). Ironically, the final budget passed on the final day of General Conference failed to provide funding for this effort. As a result, no general church board or agency can be found to have taken any steps to fulfill the clear mandate of resolution #158, despite the precious lives that continue to be lost while the church remains largely silent. The church has been gifted by God, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ,” (Eph 4:12). Yet young lives continue to be lost while the church falls short of its own commitment to act urgently and compassionately to stem the rising tide of teen suicide. As the 2004 Book of Resolutions enumerates, suicide rates among teenagers are rising dramatically, and “teens dealing with issues of sexual identity are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than are other youth” (BOR #158, p. 410). The United Methodist Social Principles encourages pastors and congregations to address the issue of suicide “through preaching and teaching. We urge
pastors and faith communities to provide pastoral care to those at risk, survivors, and their families, and to families who have lost loved ones to suicide, seeking always to remove the oppressive stigma around suicide.” (BOD ¶161N). It is time for the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference and The General Conference of the United Methodist Church to not simply pass another resolution to study this problem, but to implement a strategy for educating and equipping congregations, pastors, families and youth to respond with Christian compassion to the crisis of teen sexual identity and suicide risk. This resource is a first step toward such a strategy.

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Part One:

A Biblical Foundation

As a community of faith, we believe that we are to follow the example of Jesus by practicing a ministry of teaching and healing. We offer this study as one way to further such a high calling and witness. With this study, our intent is to foster a conversation about how GLBT teens are vulnerable to suicide. We’ll be exploring ways to confront ourselves with the reality of this situation within the explicit context of a Christian concern and response. We want to begin by grounding ourselves in the biblical principles that will serve as the foundation upon which to build this study.

All too often, mainstream Christians fail to make explicit the important connection between our biblical faith and our work of Christian ministry in the world. We assume it. That is, we take for granted that what we do, we do because of what we believe. Yet, how better informed would our faith and actions be if they sprang from hearts and minds shaped and molded by the biblical witness?

For the purposes of this study, we want to begin with a biblical perspective on the sacred worth of each individual. This is the core belief upon which we will build an understanding of how to approach and respond to our subject: Reducing the risk of suicide among sexual minority youth. Once we’ve established this guiding principle, we’ll want to take some time to look up and look into scriptures that illuminate the following five points:

- The acknowledgement that God is both the origin and destiny of all of creation
- How our attitudes can poison and our words can kill
- Our calling as a community of faith to continue Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing
- The standard of love
- Our special concern for the lost, the least, the little and the last
Core Faith Fact: The Sacred Worth of Each Individual

Just how much is a human being worth anyway? Every now and then you’ll hear on the news or read somewhere in a magazine that some wealthy entrepreneur or famous celebrity has amassed a great fortune and is now estimated at a worth of so-many billions of dollars. Astronomical figures follow the dollar signs marking the financial worth of individuals such as Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey. In modern North American culture it is very easy to equate a person’s worth or value with the amount of money they make or have.

On another scale of value, you may also have heard of surveys that measure human worth in terms of the current market value accorded to various quantities of substances that make up the human body. For example, a report in a 20-year-old magazine estimated the various chemicals that make up the human body to be worth $1.98. In answer to the question of that same formulation calculated in today’s dollars, an online forum discussion had several responses, one of which offered the following observation:

*I would guess that the article based its valuation on the mineral content of the body. Based on this, it would likely to have depreciated due to the competitive nature of supply of mineral resources to the world economy. However, in the last 20 years, various compounds have been discovered in brain chemistry. Being able to tap a brain for the endorphins will immediately make you rich as a supplier of the ultimate high chemical!!! Being able to tap the pancreas for insulin will allow you a share in the treatment of Diabetes. The Human body is worth a significant amount based on the overall chemistry of the various organs. What an article in a newstand mag (the light head mags) will likely be based on some shock value or very light science. The value of your body is, therefore, subject to the frame of reference for valuation, I know mine is priceless to me, so I treat it with some regard.*

—from www2.abc.net.au/science/k2/stn-archive1/posts/topic35524.shtm
Another respondent wrote:

“The raw materials of the body aren't worth very much (I'd estimate a few dollars worth). But organization is everything. For example, if you want a toaster, you don't go out and buy the metal and plastic it is made of (which would be reasonably cheap). You're willing to pay much more for the designed, constructed, complete version. Each person is unique in the particular arrangements of the chemicals which make up their body and brain. Hence, each should be considered and treated as very valuable.

–Ibid

Summing up the matter nicely, a third respondent wrote:

At this risk of sounding odd, the value of all the elements in the human body is about $20.00. But based on that kind of logic the Sistine chapel is worth about $3000 and the Mona Lisa is worth $0.28. The price of all the proteins, hormones, DNA etc is much more difficult to deduce but to synthesize them in a laboratory would cost many millions (maybe billions).

–Ibid

Down through history, people have used a wide variety of factors when trying to measure human worth. More traditional valuations are based on wealth, class and education, as well as being a healthy and productive member of society.

Even in our Bible, in the New Testament, Jesus touches upon the subject when he starts to graph out the sparrow to human ratio:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

–Matthew 10:29-31 (NRSV)
Listen to the same verse as it is retold in *The Message*:

What’s the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head! So don’t be intimidated by all this bully talk. You’re worth more than a million canaries. – Matthew 10:29-31 (*The Message*)

In the Bible, the question of worth takes a different turn. The frame of reference shifts completely. Now it is no longer the value of the mere human being that’s in question. Instead, value from a biblical perspective is derived from God, from God’s revealed being and action. The human’s value—any human’s value—is from God’s side, not the human’s. In other words, God determines the worth and value of God’s creatures and creation. And we learn from scripture that God has determined that human beings are worth creating. They are worth redeeming. And they are worth sustaining and perfecting. Such is the story of the Bible.

The story of the Bible is our story—the story of every human being that ever was or ever will be. Not by our might or money, not by our intelligence or influence, not by our own righteousness or religious beliefs, not by our position or popularity, not by what we think of ourselves or what others think of us are we to look for or find our individual worth. *Instead, the sacred worth of each human being is derived from God—from the God who creates and redeems, sustains and perfects us. That is our core belief.* That is the revelation that runs right through our Bible, from the Garden in Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane…and on up to the Garden set in the midst of the City come down from heaven in the book of the Revelation.

Let us bring this core belief (*the sacred value of each human being*) to bear upon our subject at hand: how we may think and act with regard to preventing suicide among sexual minority youth. Let us first establish a biblical context for our conversations by briefly exploring a few points of scriptural emphasis. We could add more, but let us discuss the following five points with a view towards giving shape to our Christian faith and witness.
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Five Points: A Biblical Context for our Conversations

1. The acknowledgement that God is both the origin & destiny of all of creation.

In small groups, read aloud the following verses: Genesis 1:1-2 and John 1:1-5.

Next read and discuss the following:

Only God is God. When humans “play” at being God we destroy one another. We do this whenever we usurp the role of God and think that we can assign and consign persons to acceptable / unacceptable status...who’s in, who’s out... who gets to heaven, who goes to hell!

Do you agree or disagree? Does this fit in with your understanding of the nature of God and the biblical witness? How?

2. How our attitudes can poison and words can kill.

And how a change of heart and mind leads to healing and wholeness.

In small groups, read aloud the following verses: Matthew 5:21-22

(We recommend reading this passage from two versions—the New Revised Standard Version and The Message.) Compare and contrast:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’, and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (NRSV)

“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients. ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.” (The Message)
J.B. Phillips translates the last line here as, “Anyone who looks down on his brother as a lost soul is himself heading for the fires of destruction.”

Next, let’s begin unpacking the text by noticing the four themes that Jesus links together:

- Murder
- Judgment
- Speaking ill of brothers and sisters
- Hell

What do you make of these connections? In what way can our attitudes be poisonous? How can our words kill?

**Suggested exercise: The Paper Doll**

You may wish to try this exercise with a paper doll. Before class cut a simple “human form-like” doll out of construction or other paper. You’ll probably want to make the doll a little larger than your hand. You will also want to bring with you to class a roll of tape. In class, after you’ve discussed how words can kill, ask the members of your small group to think of a time when they were called a name or a word was used against them that hurt them. Then pass the doll around from person to person. When the doll is received, the person is asked to remember silently the hurtful word or name and to tear off a small portion of the paper doll, then pass it on to the next person. The next person will do the same until every group member has handled the doll, which is now “in pieces.” Next, starting from the last person to have the doll and working back to the first, ask each person to think of a blessing or words of encouragement that might have made a difference instead of the hurtful words. And as they do so, ask them to attempt to tape back their torn piece with the torn piece from the person next to them. Continue until everyone has had a chance to try and make repairs to the doll. One of the obvious lessons learned from this simple yet powerful exercise is that it is far easier to tear someone apart then it is to try and put them together again.
3. Our calling as a community of faith is to continue Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing. *We pursue truth and wholeness.*

**Our Calling and Commission**

In small groups, read: Matthew 11:28-30

(Again, we recommend reading this familiar passage of scripture in two different versions—the NRSV and *The Message.*) Here is how *The Message* translates it:

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.*

That is the invitation Jesus gives us: to begin a life of discipleship—a life devoted to following him. It is our calling. And our calling to a life-long following of Jesus has both an individual and a community aspect to it. As a community of faith, Jesus commissions us to continue his ministry of teaching and healing.

Read “the Great Commission” passage which closes the gospel of Matthew: - Matthew 28:18-20.

Compare and contrast our calling with our commission. Discuss what it means to speak and act in God’s name or in the name of Jesus. Reflect on the following:

*As we listen to these words of Jesus—words of calling and commission—we recognize a pattern. It is the pattern of our own continuing journey into discipleship, of following Jesus... it is spending time with him, keeping company with Jesus and companionship with God: in prayer and meditation, in worship and study—as we follow Jesus through the pages of the gospel—getting to know his character and allowing his character to shape our own life and living... following Jesus out of the scriptures and into the streets of our own day and time—in work and*
service, teaching and healing as he taught and healed; passionately pursuing the truth that sets people free and acting decisively for the peace and wholeness—the shalom—that our broken and war-weary world so desperately needs. All this we do in God’s name.

Unfortunately, a great many other and harmful things are done in God’s name and in the name of Jesus.

Discuss some of the ways in which the loudest voices claiming to represent Jesus and/or Christianity may be doing great harm.

4. The standard of love

As Christians, we believe that part of the high calling to be human (children of God) and in the world is to come to trust and experience being held and sustained by nothing less than the love of God. Such is our need and our desire. Such is the standard to which we are held. This is a high and holy gift, offered to and available to everyone. Amazing grace is all we are and all we have to give.

In small groups read: 1 Corinthians 12, “the Gift of Love” and discuss the following question: What does love (from a biblical perspective) look like when it is lived?

5. Our special concern for the lost, the least, the little and the last

In small groups read: Matthew 18:14 and John 6:12. Discuss what it may mean to be or to feel lost.

Next read: Matthew 25:45. Answer the questions: Who is the least among us? Who are those on the margins of our society?

After that read: Matthew 10:42, Matthew 18:6, 10, 14. How are we to understand the phrase “little ones?”
Whose Children?

GLBT sons and daughters have routinely been rejected by their families — “You’re no longer a son or daughter of mine!” — and turned out of their homes and abandoned for revealing their sexual orientation. A brief survey of what the Hebrew prophets had to say about God’s concern for the orphans may help answer the question: *Whose children are these? And who is to care for them?*

Read aloud the following verses:

- Exodus 22:22,
- Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17-21, 27:19
- Psalm 10:14; 10:18; 82:3; 94:6; 146:9
- Isaiah 1:17; 1:23
- Jeremiah 5:28; 7:6; 22:3
- Ezekiel 22:7
- Hosea 14:3
- Malachi 3:5

Now that we have established our core faith fact—the sacred worth of all persons—and we have explored and discussed five points that will guide our study and conversations, setting the study within a biblical context, we are ready to take a look at some names and numbers. We are ready to put faces to statistics and see what we can learn about how vulnerable sexual minority youth are to suicide.
Part Two:
Some Numbers & Names: Putting Faces to Statistics

We live in an age of information. Each day, usually several times a day (and night), many of us log on and travel the “information highway.” That’s just one of the names for the Internet, that vast network of websites, streaming videos, RSS feeds, podcasts, downloads, uploads, search engines, e-mail and blogs. By way of the Internet, as well as other electronic and print media (such as radio, television, newspapers, etc.), we keep up-to-date with what’s going on in our world.

In a matter of seconds we can check out the weather forecast or browse through the latest news headlines. We can watch live broadcasts from the other side of the planet. We can take a virtual tour of almost any major art museum or educational institution. We can do scholarly research or catch up on celebrity gossip. So much data and information (and mis-information!) is available to us that it is easy to be overwhelmed.

Inundated daily with news reports of war casualties and mounting death tolls, for example, we begin to become numb to the numbers—not seeing the humanity behind the statistics. How quickly we forget the fundamentals of our faith, particularly that each human being is unique and irreplaceable, so that the tragic death of just one person (let alone hundreds or thousands!) is understood and felt to be a great loss.

With this study, we want to educate ourselves by confronting the facts, sorting through the data and research, and making use of the additional articles and resources suggested in the appendix. We’ll want to read and reflect, to pray and to ponder, to discuss and debate. We’ll want to do some of this privately and much of this publicly (in small groups). And we’ll want to fully engage our hearts, minds and imaginations in the process, so that we can avoid our natural tendency to become numb to the numbers—not seeing the faces behind the statistics. Let us remember to hold before us (in all that we say or do in this study) the sacred worth of all persons.
Quiz: Some facts about GLBT youth and suicide
As one way of getting into the information, break into small groups and take the following quiz. You may wish to have each member of your small group complete the quiz on their own or, you may wish to do the quiz all together, as a group. (Answer key can be found in the Appendix section of this study.)

1. True or False: Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults.
2. True or False: Gay teens are just as likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers.
3. Multiple Choice: While suicide rates among adults have steadied in the past few decades, it has increased (what percentage?) among teens and young adults.
   a. 10%  b. 15%  c. 25%  d. 300%
4. True or False: There are more suicides in the US each year than there are homicides.
5. Multiple Choice: According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, someone dies from suicide every _______.
   a. 45 minutes  b. 30 minutes  c. 18 minutes  d. 5 minutes
   a. 1 in every 13  b. 1 in every 15  c. 1 in every 21  d. 1 in every 33
7. True or False: For every two homicides, there are three suicides.
8. True or False: Nearly 60 percent of all suicides are committed with a firearm.
9. True or False: According to a Seattle school system study, gay and lesbian youth in grades 7-12 are two times as likely to make plans to commit suicide than straight youth and four times more likely to make a suicide attempt that requires medical attention.
10. True or False: According to the World Health Organization, for every teen who takes his or her life, there are 20 others who try.
Trevor—the film

As part of this study, we recommend viewing the 18-minute, Academy award-winning short film, Trevor. For more information about the film, plus news about the Trevor project, as well as several free and outstanding resources, visit www.thetrevorproject.org online.

Here is what one reviewer wrote about the film:

Get out the tissues and prepare to laugh. This short film was excellently written, directed and produced! So many people believed in this project and I see why.

This film is saving lives! It's teaching so many adults about what children go through in their young lives. It tells the story but doesn't make it heavy with depressing moments but lightens things up with humor. I cried at the end because of the joy I felt yet the sadness I felt as well because I knew that many children are still suffering today.

This should be a requirement for EVERYONE to see!

Check your local video store or Netflix for renting this film. If you'd like to purchase a VHS or DVD copy of the Trevor film, please contact Moi Garcia at Moi.Garcia@TheTrevorProject.org or (310) 271-8845 ext 229. All sales go directly to support The Trevor Helpline. Also online at www.thetrevorproject.org is an excellent set of questions to use with your group after viewing the film.
Portrait Of A GLBT Teen In Danger

So, how do we recognize when someone is suicidal? What are the signs to look for? And, are they different for GLBT youth? Are all GLBT youth prospective candidates for suicide?

Risk Factors

According to The Trevor Project Teaching Kit (written by John Misfud and revised by Ian Stulberg, LCSW), the thirteen top Risk Factors of youth suicide include the following:

- Affective Disorders including major depressive, anxiety and bi-polar disorders
- Alcohol and Substance Abuse—intoxication is present in half of all youth suicide
- Accessibility of Fire Arms—firearms are the most common method of suicide
- Family history of suicide, medical and/or psychiatric illness
- Homelessness
- Family crisis such as separation, divorce, remarriage, alcohol/addict parent, family conflict, abuse, economic hardship
- Academic crisis—failing in school, failing a test, losing a competition
- Previous suicide attempt
- Loss of a loved one—breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, fight with a loved one
- Risky sex behavior
- Eating disorders
- Victimization—bullying
- Social and/or familial isolation
Sexual orientation and gender identity alone are not risk factors for suicide. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth face many social factors which put them at higher risk for self-destructive behaviors, including suicide.

**Warning Signs**

Again, the following information is quoted in full and directly from The Trevor Project Teaching Kit.

1. **Expressing suicidal feelings** directly (“I want to die.” “I am going to kill myself.”) or making indirect statements that suggest these feelings: “Sometimes I think I would be better off dead.” “Nothing seems worthwhile anymore.” “No one will miss me anyway.”

2. **Making “final arrangements”**—giving away prized possessions, writing a will

3. **Signs of depression**—loss of pleasure, sad mood, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, feelings of hopelessness, expressing a lot of guilt

4. **Change in regular behavior**—doesn’t care much about schoolwork, starts failing tests, disinterested in personal hygiene, change in sleeping pattern

5. **Starts engaging in risky, self-destructive behavior**—including self-injury (cutting), violently acting out, or showing aggression toward others

6. **Alcohol and/or drug use increases**

7. **Increased isolation** from regular friends and family

8. **Describes a specific plan for suicide**

9. **History of suicide** in the family

10. **Previous suicide attempt**
Fit In, Hide, or Be Gone
GLBT Youth and The Need For Genuine Community

It is not only the poets who find parables everywhere and “sermons in stones.” The truth is, like the best of mysteries, almost always hidden in plain sight. Sometimes all it takes is for a simple metaphor to break through, lifting the veil (as it were) for the jig to be up. You see the mundane for what it truly is: a holy miracle. You recognize in the scene before you, not just a plain-old, ordinary family: Three unremarkable human beings, out for a stroll. One of them—who just happens to be the size of a loaf of bread—has no hair, but there is a silly bow stuck on its head and it is being held close and carried as if it were some great treasure. Both of the two taller, older ones keep fawning over it. A scene replayed, with variations, all over the planet, on just about any street you care to travel. But something stirs within you… it reminds you of indigestion, but later you’ll swear it’s the Holy Spirit. Somehow or other, you recognize in the scene before you: not just a plain-old, ordinary family… three (more or less) unremarkable human beings… but, truly, the pattern, the blueprint for community. A light bulb comes on and you get it. It is no accident that babies are born into families. It’s how human beings are supposed to be loved and nurtured into becoming human.

And it doesn’t stop there. Our need for community is a life-long need. A part of what it means to be human is to be connected, to be in relationship with others. That is why we form friendships and join clubs, churches, support groups. We have all kinds of ways for seeking out and finding community, some healthy and some not so healthy.

With the advent of the Internet, we now have the technology for seeking out and finding “virtual” communities. And you’d think that with all of our advanced communication technology—our cell phones and text messaging, our instant messaging and chat rooms and e-mails—we’d be and feel more connected than was ever possible before. Sadly, that doesn’t seem to be the way things are for most people. Most people who use most these wonderful and amazing advances in communication technology somehow find themselves feeling even more disconnected. We find within ourselves a longing for genuine community. Nothing seems to be able to replace those personal, “live, in-person” connections.
When you factor into this equation (increasingly impersonal forms of communication plus greater opportunities to isolate from one another) both the pressures of being a teenager (no longer a “kid”, yet not quite an adult either) AND the added element of being a sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) then you have a situation that can be overwhelming, spirit-crushing, de-humanizing, and ultimately fatal. Sexual minority youth often—most of the time—find themselves in the unenviable position of having to choose between hiding who they really are in order to fit in, or going off on their own. Either way, the isolation can be unbearable.

The statistics show that the pressures of simply being a teenager today is so great that the suicide rate among teens has risen 300% in the past few decades. Add to that the pressures of being a sexual minority youth or teenager and you have a group that is two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers.

These are alarming statistics, and even more alarming when you consider that these are not merely numbers we’re talking about. These are young people—our children!

⚠️ Spend some time in small groups discussing what kind of community you have to offer GLBT youth.
**A Story To Think About And Discuss**

**A Cure For Electricity**

by James Davidson

The following is a fictional short story. You may want one of your group members to read this aloud, after which we encourage a period of discussion. Share your thoughts and feelings. Talk about the story and about the need for community. Try to imagine what it must feel like to be an outsider—particularly a sexual minority.

There was this guy. I knew him. And, talk about odd. Strange. Major goofball. Possibly brilliant? Nah—probably not. But, talk about your obviously square peg—always trying to, but never quite fitting in to your basically round hole. Not ‘round about here anyway.

‘Slike he had this whole other source of energy (I guess you’d call it) that seemed to have come, like him, from some other planet or somethin’. I mean, he was, like wired…all of the time! Only, the stuff he got excited about was just so gay.

Guess I’d known the dude since, like, daycare and kindergarten. He was always coloring outside of the lines. ‘Sname was Franky Fitzbaum. We called him Franky Fit. Partly ‘cause he was such a drama queen who when he didn’t get his way would throw a “Franky fit.”

We… well, that is all of the kids used to make fun of him… for being so skinny. He was a bean pole. All his clothes hung on him. Mosta time, he couldn’t even keep his pants up, they were so big for him. (Probably were hand-me-downs. Had a huge family, Frankie did. Musta been Catholics.) Anyway… we started calling him… er, everyone started calling him, “Franky Mis-fit” On account of his clothes and all. Which, and … I shouldn’t laugh. But, you know—it is kinda funny. When you think about it.

And like, when we were in Middle School and all… and it would be raining and
stuff, so that for P.E. we hadda divide up into teams—shirts vs. the skins—and then we’d bring the cage ball outside in the rain and mud to play, “Smear The Queer With The Ball!” God, how I loved that game! Jeez, but we’d all get all muddy and stuff. But, of course, Franky… whichever team got stuck with him, he’d always—and I mean always get creamed. Bad. (And it was too bad, too. Because, you know, Franky was fast—the kid could run! Sports just wasn’t his kinda thing, though. So, lots of guys had it out for him, like.)

Then there was this time in Boy Scouts when, after doing a bunch of crappy craft projects (we hadda make junk to take home to our moms), Frankie announces… we were on this camping trip… and Frankie tells everybody that he was going to be rich and famous someday (we were to just wait and see). Rich and famous… for what, you ask? Well, let me tell you… you’re not gonna believe this: for inventing the Pine Cone Pillow. No kidding! That’s what he said. And he did it, too—stuffed a pillowcase with a bunch of pine cones in it. (I have no idea how he came up with such a lame… anyway) He was convinced he should sell ‘em—to other Boy Scouts and campers, I guess. And that… The Pine Cone Pillow…would make him rich and famous.

He wanted (I just remembered this) he wanted to get a group together—some kind of collecting club… to collect stuff. But, really gay stuff… like Moon Pie wrappers and scratch n’ sniff cards (like you’d find in magazines), and swizzle sticks and those little cocktail umbrellas, Big Band records (but on the 78’s)...and, oh yeah—fireflies. Real sissy junk. Nobody joined.

Had to say one thing for him, though…that Franky was persistent. Never quit trying to be one of us. Kept trying any scheme to get us to do stuff with him. Sheesh. Some guys just don’t get it.

God, I remember that time my mother made me go to one of Franky’s lame and flamin’ birthday parties—the embarrassing kind where they make you wear really gay hats and everyone wears nice clothes and there are no firecrackers and cool stuff like that. None of the guys wanted to go, only the girls did. By this time we were all pretty sure that Franky was... well, you know…I mean, sure, we
were still kids and all, but… there’s just no other way to say it but that he was a fag! ‘Course, I can’t say for sure. But, he hadda be, it would explain a lot. Least that is what everyone of the guys was saying. (We…they…everyone called him Franky “Miss-fit” then—with a stress on the sibilant, like a gay snake!) Anyway… I kinda always thought he was… you know… that way, myself. ‘Cause he wore glasses, hated sports (except beach volleyball), was pretty much of a nerd (read books)… and, he hung around Bruce Reynolds—who, my sister’s best friend’s brother’s cousin is absolutely dead certain had to be that way! Anyway… I was forced to wear a frickin’ bow tie and go this gay birthday party. And get this—Franky actually stuffed this enormous pink pansy piñata with Rotel Cheese Dip! I mean it! No kidding. I remember the blindfolded kid first in line—Ellen Montfort’s younger cross-eyed goofy brother—what was his name? Arnie, I think… he smacks open that pink pansy piñata with one great whack of the bat and—thud!—Rotel Cheese Dip shot out, splattering every which way. It was freakin’ hilarious!

Of course, Franky’s mom was furious with him. And us. I remember him saying, “Well, I thought it was in keeping with the festive Mexican theme.”

Guess he’s been on my mind since I heard from Brian Gault’s younger brother Ted that Frankie offed himself in the dorm at some Bible college in Tulsa. That’s not the official word, mind you. What the Fitzbaum’s are saying is that he was in an accident. Yeah, right. Accidentally shot himself.

Can’t stop thinking about him. Jerk.

I remember the last thing he said to me. Right before our High School graduation. And, oh yeah… Franky had bleached his hair, which was normally very dark, so that it became this bright orange sort of stickin’ up spikey mess. Total twit. By then, by our senior year, he’d clearly given up on trying to blend in, be one of the guys. His “friend,” Bruce Reynolds, had moved away long ago. Franky kept mostly to himself. And that afternoon we were seated next to each other, on account of us having to be in alphabetical order. (Seemed that’d been happening a lot of times in our life.) And, outta the blue, he just blurts out to me
that I’d always been his best friend. His best friend? No way. I’m not gay! But I couldn’t say anything. Just sat there. After awhile he asked me what I was gonna do with my life. I told him I thought I’d go to college on a football scholarship. (And I did, too.) He said that was real good. He seemed, I thought, kinda sad really. Don’t know why. He was finally getting’ outta this dump. He said that he didn’t know exactly what he was gonna do with his life. He said—and I remember this part word-for-word, just like it was yesterday—he said he “might try and find a cure for electricity.”

“A cure for electricity?” And all I could think of was that this dude was definitely not from around here (in the planet earth sense of not being from around here.) Must have been from sleeping on the pine cone pillow of his! “A cure for electricity?” Just what is that supposed to mean anyway?
Part Three:
A Christian Response

The Church as Sanctuary: Creating A Safe Space for GLBT Youth

How safe a space for sexual minority youth is your community of faith?

In small groups, try asking and answering the following questions to and about your particular community of faith:

- Does our church teach the sacred worth of all persons (regardless of race, color, nationality, political affiliation, creed, mental & physical ability and sexual orientation)?
- Does our church welcome and embrace a diversity of persons, including GLBT persons?
- How comfortable would coming out be for a youth in our church?
- What programming does our church have in place to promote awareness of suicide among sexual minority youth?
- Is there a support group for GLBT teens either in or affiliated with our church?
- What is our wider denomination’s official position on homosexuality?
- What is our wider denomination’s plan of action with regard to suicide among sexual minority youth?
- What are some things our church can do (or do better) in order to create (or improve) a safe place for GLBT youth?
- How would you rate your local congregation, with regard to faith and practice, as it is specifically related to the task of reducing suicide among sexual minority youth?
  - all talk and no action
  - some talk and some action
  - no talk and no action
  - a seamless unity of faith and practice
Earlier in our study we identified certain factors that were key to understanding and responding to the subject of our study. One of those was how certain attitudes can poison and words can kill. Having come thus far through our study, what are some ways we can keep a check on our poisonous attitudes and our deadly words? What are some ways we might want to encourage healthy and loving attitudes and life-giving words—to implement blessings instead of curses?

Now that we’ve begun to address some crucial questions and answers with regard to our Christian response, let’s conclude our study with a resolve to do two things:

- First, let us resolve to be a people with listening hearts.
- And second, let us together devise a plan—concrete steps we can take, things we can do to spread awareness of this issue and to work toward preventing suicide among sexual minority youth.

Let us commit ourselves to putting it (and our faith) into action!

With A Listening Heart

Some things are hard for us to hear. And not in the sense of volume—as when we must adjust the loudness of the television or the receptivity of a hearing device. Instead, some things are hard for us to hear because those very words may jar us into a reality we don’t want and feel unprepared to face—as when we are confronted with a truth we’d rather ignore altogether. (Something far more alarming than the mere embarrassment of being told that you have a bit of spinach stuck in your teeth. For that kind of news, although embarrassing, can be dealt with. And we are usually grateful to the kind and brave soul who spoke up.) Surely though we can at least imagine with some empathy how a parent may feel when a beloved son or daughter has confided that they are gay. How would we feel? (Or how indeed did we feel, if such a thing has already happened.)

More importantly than how we feel at the time when such (potentially) hard-to-hear words are spoken is how we listen, specifically, how do we engage a listening heart?
One thing we can do is to try to understand that, more than likely, at the very same time we are receiving words that are hard to hear, we are hearing words that are hard to say—words that, until they were actually spoken, were probably felt next to impossible to say. And to be aware that someone we love has somehow mustered the courage and the faith to entrust us with their deepest personal truth (even though they might just be the very words we’d have given anything not to hear). We are being given one of the greatest gifts of all: that of an open heart. (Think of how much of our lives is spent hiding our true thoughts and feelings!) Open hearts are best met by listening hearts, so as to keep them alive and beating…so as not to cause them to close and harden.

One of the skills you learn while training to volunteer at a suicide and crisis hotline is active listening. At intervals, you repeat back in a paraphrase of your own what you understand the caller to have said (What I hear you saying is…). The point being that it is important for the caller to know that she or he is being heard. Regular (though not robot-like) practice can equip you with good active listening skills. Gradually you’ll begin to appreciate this tool that you can use for better communication in almost any situation. But, particularly when we are speaking of confessions, of words hard to hear and hard to say, how urgent is the need—especially now—for the church to be a people of open hearts, open minds, open doors—and for that to be the reality and not just the advertising campaign!

With a Concrete Plan of Action

Hopefully you’ve already generated some ideas toward your plan of action (during the questions we asked as a part of the Church as Sanctuary: Creating A Safe Place for GLBT Youth section.) If you’d like additional ideas, please refer to the appendix of this study for further resources.

Now is the time to begin putting it all together—everything you’ve learned from this study and your best ideas for what to do as your Christian response. You may wish to form a special committee or task force dedicated to exploring options. But whatever
you do, commit yourselves as disciples of Jesus to follow his lead in this matter, to move out into the world, continuing his ministry of teaching and healing.

In your gathered assembly read aloud your resolution to act.
Conclusion:

To Be The Church Following Jesus in a Teaching and Healing Ministry

By entering into and participating in this study we have already accomplished something vitally important. Of course there is much more to be said and done. But let us also celebrate where we are in our journey of following Jesus by continuing his ministry of teaching and healing.

As disciples (followers of Jesus) we are all about pursuing the truth: the truth that sets us free and the truth that brings healing and wholeness. Learning what we can about suicide and how sexual minority youth are especially vulnerable to it… learning what we can do as a part of our Christian faith and response to this situation… and then, with a sense of urgency, passing on this awareness, along with our creative ideas and action plans… this is part and parcel of what discipleship is all about.

Christian education doesn’t end when we grow up and no longer have to go to Sunday School. We have ever-greater needs and reasons to support and participate in vibrant and on-going Adult Education programs in our churches! And Christian Education is not limited to the classroom, Bible studies or retreats—though we can and should be grateful for those wonderful opportunities to stretch heart, mind and imagination by the largeness of the gospel. Christian education is what happens when we follow the lead of our teacher/healer, Jesus.

When our GLBT youth learn from us that they are of sacred worth, then there is a teaching/healing ministry. When our GLBT youth sense and trust our community of faith as a safe place for them to be who they are, and that open hearts will be met by listening hearts, then there is a teaching/healing ministry. When our GLBT youth see that our “family values” mean that we’re all family and that you can’t be kicked out of the family, then there is a teaching/healing ministry. When we sincerely and visibly align ourselves with the programs and groups that reach out to and support our GLBT youth, that seek to understand and be understanding, then we are at the very heart of what it is to be Jesus people in the midst of his teaching and healing ministry with and to and for all the world. God grant us the grace to be such a people!
Appendix: Resource for Further Study and Action

From The United Methodist Social Principles

We believe that suicide is not the way a human life should end. Often suicide is the result of untreated depression, or untreated pain and suffering. The church has an obligation to see that all persons have access to needed pastoral and medical care and therapy in those circumstances that lead to loss of self-worth, suicidal despair, and/or the desire to seek physician-assisted suicide. We encourage the church to provide education to address the biblical, theological, social, and ethical issues related to death and dying, including suicide. United Methodist theological seminary courses should also focus on issues of death and dying, including suicide.

A Christian perspective on suicide begins with an affirmation of faith that nothing, including suicide, separates us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Therefore, we deplore the condemnation of people who complete suicide, and we consider unjust the stigma that so often falls on surviving family and friends.

We encourage pastors and faith communities to address this issue through preaching and teaching. We urge pastors and faith communities to provide pastoral care to those at risk, survivors, and their families, and to those families who have lost loved ones to suicide, seeking always to remove the oppressive stigma around suicide. The Church opposes assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Online Articles:


Online Media:

At the time of publication these short YouTube.com videos were available and are recommended for watching & discussing:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvjiGueLq20M
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H7kXLO5Wb0
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I49vALmTcZ4
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90qg_oVD1cc
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYo_IYlISwk
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=979ON7wOMZs
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9qfzI5-OgM
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5XnZTYbOkc

Resources:

The Trevor Helpline,  866/ 4-U-TREVOR (66/488-7386), thetrevorhelpline.org
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 888/333-AFSP, www.afsp.org
Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG), 202/467-8180, pflag.org
Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 212/727-0135, glsen.org
Human Rights Campaign (HRC), 800/777-4723, hrc.org
National Hopeline Network, 800-SUICIDE (800/784-2433), hopeline.com
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 800-273-TALK (800/273-8255), suicidepreventionlifeline.org
American Association of Suicidology (AAS), 202/237-2280, suicidology.org
Answer Key to Part Two Quiz

1. True

2. False. Gay teens are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers.

3. d. 300%

4. True

5. c. 18 minutes

6. a. 1 in every 13

7. True

8. True

9. True

10. True
AFTER THE FACT: REDUCING THE RISK OF SUICIDE AMONG SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

Lesson Plan for One 1-hour event

If you are using this study as a one-time, one hour-long Sunday School/Adult Christian Education event, then, based on time restraints we recommend the following format:

Naturally, we recommend that the leader(s) read through all of the material in order to be more fully equipped to lead the group through the lessons. It is also highly recommended that you provide the following handouts:

- An outline of the lesson
- A copy of all the Biblical references to the sacred worth of each individual and the five points
- A copy of the Part Two Quiz
- A plan of action worksheet.

Introduction:

The leader(s) welcome the class members and provide a brief summary introduction—a simple two or three short sentences, in your own words, about the subject and reasons for having this study here and now. (You will want to distribute the lesson’s outline handout as class members come in, so that they have it to refer to when you begin.)

Part One:
A Biblical Foundation

The leader(s) or volunteers distribute the 2nd handout (biblical references). Then, the leader(s) or others from among the class read the first and third paragraphs (including the five bullet-points that follow paragraph 3). Explain that for brevity’s sake, we will be discussing the sacred worth of each individual and breaking into smaller groups to work on one of the bullet points.
Core Faith Fact: The Sacred Worth of Each Individual

The leader(s) or volunteer reads aloud the first paragraph. Next, take a quick oral survey from the class: *Just how much would you say a human being is worth?* Write down the various answers on a chalkboard or large pad of paper. Then have someone read from Matthew 10: 29-31. Ask the class what they hear and understand Jesus to be saying in this passage. Then have someone read aloud the paragraph that begins, “The story of the Bible is our story…”

Five Points: A Biblical Context for our Conversations

Again, because of time constraints, mention that we will not have time to go into these points in any detail—we can only name them, but that the scripture verses canvassed on your handout will be of great value when read and reflected upon by each individual at home and as a part of their personal Bible study and/or devotional time. Instead, what we will do is to break into small groups and, it is recommended that *Point 2 How our attitudes can poison and words can kill* be followed (including lesson with paper doll: see instructions for preparations ahead of class).

Part Two:

Some Numbers & Names: Putting Faces to Statistics

Leader(s) to distribute Quiz handout. For time’s sake, it is best to run through the Quiz together, asking for answers, then giving the correct one.

Portrait Of A GLBT Teen In Danger

Ask one class member to read aloud *The Risk Factors* and another to read aloud *The Warning Signs*. 
Fit In, Hide, or Be Gone

The Need For Genuine Community and GLBT Youth

You might wish, at this point, to acknowledge how fast we seem to be going through the material, but that time constraints demand that we press on if we are going to get through the highlights of the study. The leader can then make a simple summary statement (based on the study material for this section) on the need for community. This will transition us to…

Part Three:
A Christian Response

The Church as Sanctuary: Creating A Safe Space for GLBT Youth

Leader(s) or someone from among the class reads aloud each of the bullet-point questions under this section. Explain in advance that these questions are to be spoken aloud as questions. Please ask the gathered class to listen carefully and prayerfully to each one—not giving a verbal answer at this time, but just letting them “soak in.” Next, distribute the plan of action sheets. Break into small groups and ask each group to come up with some preliminary action plans. Be open to all suggestions and write each down. When you re-assemble into the larger group, have one member from each group share some of their ideas.

At this point, you may want to ask for volunteers to become an action committee to study how best to put the best ideas into action.

Conclude by reading aloud the final paragraph of the study beginning with, “When our GLBT youth learn from us…”

Thank everyone for participating in this difficult subject

and

Close with prayer.
AFTER THE FACT: REDUCING THE RISK OF SUICIDE AMONG SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

Lesson Plan for Three consecutive one-hour events

- Week One: Introduction and Part One
- Week Two: Part Two (with Trevor film)
- Week Three: Part Three

Lesson Plan for an all-day retreat:

- Morning session: Introduction and Part One
- Break for Lunch
- Afternoon Session: Part Two (with Trevor film)
- Short break
- Part Three
Thank you for your interest in our curriculum. We would like to get your feedback on this study and hope you'll take a moment to fill out the very short evaluation below. This is an evolving project and any feedback you can provide would be appreciated.

Please send your comments via email to office@wallingfordumc.org, or by regular mail to:

Wallingford UMC
2115 North 42nc Street
Seattle, WA 98103

Please Evaluate this Resource:

Please rank on a scale from 1 (Poor) – 5 (Excellent) the following areas. Feel free to give comments.

____ CONTENT
Your Comments:

____ PRESENTATION
Your Comments:

____ USEFULNESS
Your Comments:

____ SENSITIVITY
Your Comments:

Any other comments you'd like to share:

Thank You!