Transgender people are a blessing

By Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, Special to the BDN

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Marvin Ellison Jr. leads a Christian ethics class at Bangor Theological Seminary's Portland campus last fall. [*Buy Photo*](http://store.bangordailynews.com/Other/Week-of-July-29-2013/30777700_DM86kd#2663645407_9JDgTdV)

Thank God for transgender persons and their families, who exemplify the amazing beauty of the divine creation in all its complexity and rich diversity.

It is a blessing to share community with our transgender sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and fathers and mothers and to work alongside them to assure that each and every person, including each and every transgender person, has what they need and deserve: respect and a secure sense of personal dignity and worth, a fair share of resources, a life without fear, and the freedom to live in the world as one’s authentic self.

As a clergyperson and president of the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination, I am proud of the fact that RCAD’s statewide multireligious network of faith leaders has committed itself to a three-year initiative to promote transgender inclusion and equality in our congregations and communities.

As a Christian ethicist, I have often reminded seminarians and myself that it is wise, in the midst of social change, to slow down and avoid “premature clarity,” or what might be called rush to judgment. Before giving any kind of ethical evaluation, we ought to take the time to understand as fully as possible the reality before us, in this instance transgenderism. The best way to gain understanding is to listen to and learn from transgender persons.

Maine Transnet, a nonprofit organization in Maine, is dedicated to educating the public about gender identity and raising awareness of the varied forms of gender expression. Its website provides resources to the trans community of Maine, as well as consultation, education and training to social service, mental health professionals and interested others. My advice, then, is to “go to the source” and become better educated.

Our first step is to learn, because too many people, including Michael Heath, in his July 23 BDN OpEd “On sexual morality,” are uninformed or misinformed when it comes to transgender persons and their lives. To trivialize a transgender person as someone posing as “a man in a dress” or to speak judgmentally of sexual difference as “normalizing perversion” is a sure sign that religiously affiliated persons, as well as all persons of good will, have work to do to become better informed and more respectful of those transgender persons in Maine and elsewhere who courageously and generously share their lives, hopes and concerns with the non-transgender majority.

Awareness of transgender persons in our families, schools and congregations may help us appreciate how the categories we often rely on to describe human reality may actually be quite limited (and limiting) in their capacity to encompass the wide spectrum of human difference.

Transgender refers to those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from their biological sex. Many transgender people find that the sex assigned to them at birth (their natal sex) is incompatible with their gender identity. (“I am told I am a boy, and my body looks male, but I know myself to be female, and it’s far easier to re-sculpt my body than it is to alter my psyche.”) For an educational resource that offers language that is respectful of sexual and other kinds of difference, see the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing’s online resource, [“A Time to Seek: Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity.”](http://www.religiousinstitute.org/timetoseek)

Extending a respectful, hospitable welcome to transgender people and their families is fully in keeping with Jesus’ mandate to love thy neighbor. Standing within the prophetic tradition of his community, Jesus called for a new moral order constructed on the basis of biblical justice or the principle of right relatedness.

If we question whether our relations with others are just and rightly ordered, we need only ask two questions. First, ask how transgender persons (and others on the margins) are being treated and whether they live with dignity and security as respected members of the community. If the answer is “no” or “not yet,” then a second question should be posed: Are those in the non-transgender majority willing to trade places? If we hesitate, then we have serious justice education and advocacy to do together.

Now let’s rush to engage in that educational journey — for the sake of transgender persons, yes, but also for the sake of our own souls.

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