

Breaking Down the Acronym: L & G

Before our congregation can make a difference in our community when it comes to accepting people of all sexualities and genders, it is important for each of us to know who, exactly, we are trying to include. When we say “our reconciling church supports the LGBTQIA community,” who are we talking about?

This month, we will define the first two and best known letters of the acronym: L for lesbian and G for gay.

The word “homosexuality” comes from the Greek “homos,” meaning ‘same,’ and the Latin “sexual,” referring to biological sex or gender; as such, homosexuality can accurately be defined as “only experiencing attraction towards people of the same gender as oneself.” The colloquial terms for homosexuality include “lesbian” and “gay”: “gay” refers to all homosexual people regardless of gender, while the term “lesbian” only refers to gay women. (Another popular term in the LGBT+ community is “sapphic,” which is generally used to refer to any woman who experiences any same-gender attraction at all, including Bisexual women.)

Homosexuality has existed since the dawn of time, and has always fluctuated between being socially acceptable or unacceptable depending on social attitudes about love. For instance, early Medieval society made rules against homosexuality because they thought that the only reason to ever have intercourse was to have children, not to express love, and therefore thought homosexual relationships were lustful. By the 18th century, though marrying to carry on the family was still a social obligation, the idea of marrying for love became such a popular romantic concept that it was very common for gay people to correspond romantically through letters, poetry, or short stories dedicated to one another. (One example of this is Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” written as an extended metaphor about the loss of the love of his life to an arranged marriage.)

Boston marriages became common among upper class lesbians in the 19th century onward, and it was just as common for gay men to marry lesbian women and move into duplexes to disguise the fact that they were living with their same-sex partners rather than their legal spouses. Gay people who couldn’t make arrangements like this would often live unhappily married in the heterosexual relationships society expected of them. At the start of the 20th century, a movement to put a stop to state-sanctioned homophobia started up among writers and activists; with it came an incredible boom in the arts that still defines many of the USA’s performing, visual, and linguistic art traditions to this day.

Some notable lesbians in history include Ancient Greek poet Sappho (for whom lesbianism and sapphism are named), diarist Anne Lister, Civil Rights activist Audre Lorde, astronaut Sally Ride, Queen Christina of Sweden, and suffragette and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams. (There are many more women like the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt—whose love letters to Lorena Hickok were only discovered after her death—who are subject to speculation of whether they are part of lesbian or bisexual history.) Some notable gay men in history include the father

of computer science Alan Turing, writer and activist James Baldwin, Frederick the Great of Germany, Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci, writer and poet Hans Christian Andersen, writer and activist Langston Hughes, and the 15th President of the United States, James Buchanan.

Although homosexuality was never particularly rare, all of the hiding in plain sight that characterizes most of modern gay history was necessary during those times: people throughout the ages have been persecuted and tortured for being gay, and in some states and countries, still are today. But the fight for acceptance doesn't stop at human rights or marriage; it extends all the way down to even the most basic interactions between people. Being respectful and thinking before speaking can go a long way to help reduce the biases against all LGBT+ people even in our everyday lives.

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