

The Naming Project is a Christian camp that celebrates LGBTQ teens as they are

“We ask questions like, who am I? Who did God make me to be?”

[Clint Schneklath](#) interviews Ross Murray in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



(Photo courtesy of the Naming Project)

Ross Murray is the author of Made, Known, Loved: Developing LGBT-Inclusive Youth Ministry. He works for the LGBTQ advocacy organization GLAAD as the director of news and faith initiatives and runs an ELCA-based camp for LGBTQ youth called the Naming Project.

How did the Naming Project start?

We started the Naming Project in 2003, and then the first camp was in 2004. My original grand vision was a Sunday afternoon meeting in a church basement in Minneapolis. Later, Pastor Brad Froslee came to us and said, “I’ve always had this dream of doing a church camp for gay kids.” The camp was much more successful than the weekly meeting because young people have busy lives, and committing themselves to a couple hours on a Sunday afternoon was hard.

When we started the Naming Project, we talked a lot about the perceived conflict between being LGBTQ and being Christian. I don't feel like that's the conversation anymore. But we're still seeing very basic health and safety attacks happening, more targeted at young people, which is definitely a shift.

Why did you call it the Naming Project?

I'm a youth ministry person, so I'm big into identity development and vocation. We ask questions like, Who am I? Who did God make me to be? What did God call me to do in the world? Those questions are best handled during adolescence, when we are learning a lot more about who we are. Later in life we have to unlearn so much false information about ourselves. I would much rather people live healthy lives because they've integrated all that stuff early.

Then you shifted to the overnight camp experience.

We do a weeklong camp at Bay Lake Camp, owned by a Lutheran church in St. Paul. I love it because it is an island in Bay Lake in central Minnesota. There's something about being on an island that feels like you are physically removed from the rest of the world. I feel like being surrounded by a body of water, having to go on a boat to get across, reinforces the idea that the world is over there, where we can see it. We know that things are going on, we're going to talk about it, we're going to eventually experience it, but for this moment, we are in space set apart.

I used to be a camp director and spent years as a camp counselor. The fun thing about camp for any youth is that it is a space set apart. You go away and you can explore a different identity, or at least an aspect of your identity. You can show up and be more outgoing than you are at school, for example. I love the name of your camp because it calls out the spiritual side of that—the naming.

Camp lets you be a different persona. I'm from a very small town; everybody knows everybody. Part of the difficulty of growing up and coming out was realizing, *If I do this, then there's a whole undoing of expectations that have been layered upon me.* If you go to a different space, you can be yourself in a different way, without the baggage of people that know you. For queer kids I think that is especially true.

At the Naming Project we put that into our practice as well: this is a space of exploration. One of our policies is that we will believe what youth tell us about

themselves, and we will treat them according to what they tell us about themselves—until such time that they tell us something different. And then we adjust how we treat them. If next year they tell us something new, we won't shame them by saying "Why didn't you tell me this last year?" We will say, "This is something that you are learning and knowing and understanding for yourself."

Youth have done this exploration with things like their names. In the rest of their lives, they get referred to by the name that their parents give to them. Trying to get folks to change that is really hard. But in our camp space, they're coming into a group of strangers, and the only person who saw their registration form is me. I can pretty easily adjust my list to match who they are.

We've had campers over the years who would say, "I know that you called me that last year. I want you to call me this this year." They're very apologetic about it. But they have the space to say: *I want to try this on to see how it feels. I need to hear someone referring to me in the third person, using this name, so I can understand whether it actually resonates with my soul.* That's been powerful.

Parents fill out the registration forms. Then a youth might arrive, fully female presenting, and give me a very masculine name, which I see on my list. I ask, "Is that what you want us to call you?" She says, "No, that's my grandma filling out the form. Would you call me this?" We quickly make the adjustment. There's a beauty in that.

Right now there's a big cultural argument about calling people by their names. State legislatures are passing laws about what you can call people. Schools are refusing to call you by any other name besides what your parents gave you or what gets written on your birth certificate.

But as Christians we have a book full of stories of people who got their names changed, right? It's a beautiful, God-given moment that usually marks a change in their destiny, receiving this new name. Name change is the most biblical thing that they could be doing, and it's odd that certain Christians have really dug into refusing to recognize a transgender person's name.

We're starting a Queer Camp in Northwest Arkansas this summer that is similar to the Naming Project, and we are surprised by how many adults are interested in helping. They say, "Oh wow, I wish I would have had a space like that when I was a kid."

We hear that so much at the Naming Project. We do need to think about this in how we do youth development and youth ministry. Can we do it in a way that might help people not have to deal with this so much as adults?

If COVID hadn't messed it up last year, we were going to launch an adult camp just as pure fun. If you want the youth experience, here you go: arts and crafts, the silly songs that we sing in the morning, all of that. The only difference was going to be a happy hour.

I do have to tell the adult volunteers we work with at the Naming Project, "This can be a good, fulfilling experience for you, but remember, this is a youth ministry and they are the focus." If you are uncovering a feeling, talk to me about that, don't process emotionally with young people. Let them have their experience, knowing that their lives and their experiences, even if we find something relatable, are really different from ours as adults.

In your book you talk about how the church can be a place of identity affirmation instead of identity betrayal, as it has too often been.

One thing that churchy folks don't always realize is that the default perception among many LGBTQIA youth and allies is that Christians are going to be anti-LGBTQ, unless proven or demonstrated otherwise. We are coming off of 1,700 years of Christianity being the dominant, empire-backed, culturally trusted, and culture-reinforcing institution.

There isn't hostility against Christianity per se; there's indifference. People think, "Christianity exists, but it doesn't impact my life." By this point, most churches know that it is not popular to be anti-LGBTQ, and so they're not going to advertise their anti-LGBTQ attitude. The ones that do are kind of helpful because we know to avoid them. But ministries that do a bait and switch are the most difficult. It leaves LGBTQ people asking, "How much can I get into this community before I hit one of those barriers to inclusion?"

When you hit that barrier, it's a huge letdown. If you'd known about that before, you could have prevented this moment of pain. Our camps and congregations need to proactively think through that. Where do potential barriers come up, and if we really want to be welcoming places, how do we make sure those barriers can get taken down in a good way that is faithful and in line with our values?

As mainline Protestant, center or left kinds of places, we have to grapple with this, because we are still coming off of a history of exclusion and cultural dominance. Maybe we don't have as much cultural dominance anymore, but we forget that we don't have it and we want to act like we're the trusted authority. It actually helps us to be more faithful if we don't think that we're the trusted authority. It makes us work harder, and that makes our ministry better.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Camping out."