



(Unsplash/Christian Lue)



by Emma Cieslik

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

June 28, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Sid High wants Beloved Arise — the five-year-old organization dedicated to empowering queer youth of faith — to be available in every school, therapist's office, mental health website and worship space across the country.

With [Queer Youth of Faith Day](#) and National Day of Prayer for LGBTQ+ Youth right around the corner on June 30, it seems like a lofty goal, but trans Christian and Beloved Arise youth ambassador High, who organized the first day of prayer with fellow ambassador Sabrina Hodak, argues that this organization is essential suicide prevention for queer young people across the United States.

According to a 2009 Statista research study, [47.1% of gay men and 46.5% of lesbian women](#) report growing up in a moderately or somewhat religious environment, and many of these religious spaces and values their families attend and hold influence the queerphobia they encountered at home.

"Due to so many people and families pushing this traditional mindset of you have to marry a man or a woman, you have to be a certain way," High shared, "it makes people get depressed and a lot of people end up, sadly, killing themselves." It's an all-too-true story captured in the recent [podcast series Dear Alana](#).

In fact, despite this persistent queerphobia, religion remains a key part of many LGBTQ+ people's lives. According to a 2020 research report from UCLA's Williams Institute, [5.3 million or half of all LGBTQ+ adults](#) in the United States are religious, and many queer people need not only community among LGBTQ+ individuals but also among queer people of faith. There are more resources today for queer people of faith than 50 years ago, like New Ways Ministry and Outreach, but few of these organizations specifically cater to youth. Beloved Arise seeks to change that.

"Beloved Arise established Queer Youth of Faith Day," Beloved Arise founder Jun Young explained, "not only to celebrate these young lives, but to raise awareness among allies, especially those in faith communities to care for and uplift their queer youth."

This year, during Pride Month, Beloved Arise will share testimonials from LGBTQ+ young people of faith, all of whom shared their experiences through Beloved Arise's essay contest. National Day of Prayer for LGBTQ+ Youth does the same, countering the weaponization of prayer for queerphobic ends.

Unlike the National Prayer Breakfasts and prayer events, such as collective rosaries and novenas for America's faith that often further far-right political ends, this day seeks to empower queer young people, religious leaders and allies to pray for a future where queer young people are free to be themselves, talk about themselves and their families, and envision their futures, regardless of their faith.

This day of celebration and joyful prayer fights the forced dichotomy of LGBTQ+ identity and faith in the United States. This was a key part of Young's own coming out story — 45 years in the making.

Young grew up in a Catholic household in the Philippines. Although he first recalls being attracted to other boys at age 12, he repressed these feelings. "It was my 'burden' to bear," Young explained. Raised in a church where he was taught that being gay was sinful, he felt that coming out would mean giving up his faith. He and his family converted to Protestantism when they immigrated to the United States but unfortunately, no church they attended affirmed LGBTQ+ identities.

At the age of 45, Young came out as a gay Christian. Years earlier, he had explored queer liberation theology, which gave him the language to acknowledge that "my queerness is not a curse, but a gift from God." It also allowed him to challenge and deconstruct this dichotomy between LGBTQ+ identity and Christian faith. In many religious communities, LGBTQ+ people are told that living authentically means choosing themselves over God, and they face intense persecution or are totally cast out of their churches, synagogues and mosques when they come out.

In the LGBTQ+ community, religion is a traumatic topic for these very reasons, so it sometimes feels like another coming out experience when a queer person shares with other LGBTQ+ friends that they are also religious. LGBTQ+ people of faith can struggle to find community or face backlash from some in the LGBTQ+ community for staying in these institutions that hurt many other queer people.

"I wanted to challenge this narrative," he explained, "especially among queer youth growing up in faith spaces where this binary thinking is taught. I want the next generation of queer folks to know that they do not have to accept the tyranny of 'OR' — they can embrace the power of 'AND.' "

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Young founded Beloved Arise to celebrate and empower queer youth of faith. The first Queer Youth of Faith Day was held in June 2021. In 2023, Beloved Arise held the first National Day of Prayer for LGBTQ+

Youth. With this goal of increasing visibility, Beloved Arise selects youth ambassadors like High and Hodak to serve as spokespeople for the organization and representatives of queer youth of faith.

## Advertisement

High was not raised Christian, but when he came to the faith at age 14, he encountered many people who said that God would reject him, that his identity was a sin and that he was not welcome in church. High connects this religious bigotry to the death threats that trans people like him receive daily in the United States. In response, he started a letter writing campaign in which he answered questions about being gay and Christian, mental health, and his faith via handwritten letters or email — if the recipient felt unsafe to receive the letter at home.

Beloved Arise loved his idea and in 2022, he joined the organization as a youth ambassador. Not only did the organization supply High with more stamps for his letters, but also encouraged him to fight the erasure of queer people of faith.

Mia Miller, a youth ambassador who joined the organization in April 2024, hopes to bring another critical perspective on queering traditional religion. A nonbinary BIPOC Muslim, Miller was raised Christian but converted to Islam in high school. Miller argues that just as Allah is genderless and defies gendered descriptors, they too see themselves made in the image of Allah and thus in the vision of what is divine and holy.

Hodak, who joined the organization in 2022, was raised in an Orthodox Jewish household and has Moroccan Jewish ancestry. She didn't learn much about the LGBTQ+ community growing up, even when she started attending public school once her family moved to Florida. She first encountered LGBTQ+ discrimination in her youth group, where her religious mentors encouraged people to fight their desires. She acknowledged she was attracted to another girl in middle school but didn't come out to her supportive friends until high school, and to her family several years later.

In 2020, Hodak was researching queer Jewish communities and encountered the Jewish Queer Youth app.

"The way that I queer my relationships with faith," she explained, "is sort of not like creating, but forging my own path and finding ways that aren't just like these mitzvahs that are put on a pedestal almost, just finding ways to really connect with Torah learning."

It was on this app that she first saw the advertisement for Beloved Arise Youth Ambassadors and applied several months later.

Hodak has been instrumental in representing and raising awareness for queer Jewish young people, hosting a video series on the Jewish holidays and live conversations with queer Jewish creators. In her experience, not only did she feel isolated and without community, but she also struggled to find answers about mitzvahs for queer people, like Shomer Negiah, which involves not touching the opposite sex until marriage.

"Being a youth of faith ambassador is listening to the needs of the queer faith community and for me at least, trying to be the representation that I didn't see growing up," Hodak said.