

Just friends

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Last month *Slate* ran a [series](#) by Juliet Lapidos called Strictly Platonic. Lapidos and her friend Jeffrey were born in 1983. They've been friends since meeting at summer camp as teenagers. There were a few forays into romantic experimentation, but today they're more like brother and sister; they're friends.

What's interesting here are the historical and cultural forces that shape our most intimate personal relationships. "If Jeff and I had been born in, say, 1923 instead of 1983," Lapidos muses, "we might never have had the chance to develop a nonromantic attachment." They would not have attended the same camp, she would not have been admitted to the college she attended, and they would not have lived as post-college roommates.

I'm a couple years older than Jeff and Juliet, but my peers and I are just as comfortable with friendships between the sexes. This has periodically led to confusion or ambiguity. The idea has met with some

surprising resistance and has raised broader questions about gender, friendship and intimacy.

"Platonic friendships" come with ambiguity and, like many relationships, change over time. In high school and college, with hormones raging, I considered just about everybody a romantic prospect. But things calmed down over time. Some folks became boyfriends; others became friends.

One night after I'd spent an evening hanging out with a male friend, my parents pressed me for some clarity. They felt it was okay to sit on the couch and watch a movie with a friend but not, unattended, with a boyfriend. And they had their doubts that a boy and a girl who enjoyed each other's company could just be friends.

My generation's comfort with and enjoyment of friendships across gender lines raises questions for the church. If the broader culture indicates a collapsing of interests between men and women (similar interests being an important foundation for friendships), does the church have anything to gain by defining the football fellowship as a men's activity and the book group as something for women? Curricula for teenagers tend to stress gender difference, too—not just in learning styles or physicality, but in terms of theological experience. Boys are [apparently](#) always fighting temptation, while girls are [constantly](#) being lied to.

Having close friends of the opposite sex is—for young straight folks, in particular—great preparation for having successful romantic partnerships, for learning how to see someone as she or he is and not as an ideal. I worry that stressing gender differences serves young people poorly by (among other things) teaching them to view relationships as us vs. them.

This subject

is also interesting to me as a member of the clergy—as a young woman who has worked intimately with a lot of male colleagues since my early 20s.

Congregations with both a male and a female pastor will often think of them as a pair: they become

"mom and pop" to the youth group, to the Sunday school kids and even to some of

the adults. This is not news to those who follow family-systems theory, but it can be difficult to navigate, particularly in jobs in which we too often spend more time with our colleagues than with our spouses.

If cross-gender friendships are here to stay—and I hope they are—the church needs further conversation about what that means and how they work. Our "boundary training workshops" will have to reflect more complex realities.