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## Damned to Hell: The Black Church Experience for College Educated Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

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*University of Central Florida*



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**DAMNED TO HELL:  
THE BLACK CHURCH EXPERIENCE FOR COLLEGE EDUCATED  
LESBIANS, GAYS, AND BISEXUALS**

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 1999  
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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Major Professor: David A. Gay

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite increased acceptance nationally towards same-sex sexuality, intolerance within the Black Church against those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) continues to persist. As one of the most important institutions in the African American community, the significance of the Black Church makes the religious experience particularly influential. LGBs frequently experience homonegativity in the Black Church in the form of homophobic laced sermons, Microaggressions, and church gossip. The stigma LGBs encounter around homosexuality in the Black Church has created a dissonance between their religious beliefs, faith, and sexual identity. This study explores the multifaceted experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in Black Church. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Patricia Hill Collins' Intersectionality and Erving Goffman's stigma, this research focuses on how the intersections of one's religious and sexual identities is impacted and influenced by stigma experienced within the Black Church. This study is based on 14 in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who attended the Black Church and reveals the complex relationship LGBs experience trying to integrate their religious and sexual identities. Additionally, participant narratives provides insight into the impact of homonegative stigma sexual minorities experience in the Black Church.

To my heart and greatest gift Austin Spencer Andrews, I am forever thankful that I was chosen to be your mother and I have been blessed by your patience, encouragement, and support these past four years. I love you more, more.

To my mother Eunice A. Randall, thank you for always being there to cheer me on and keep me grounded. Your constant love, prayers, and support was everything that I needed to push forward to complete this degree.

To M.J. I look forward to the day you can be your authentic self with your family.

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## TERMINOLOGY

**Black Church**- refers to a collection of seven denominations the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention USA, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention

**Cultural Tools**- a collection of symbols, rituals, and practices people draw from to accomplish a particular behavior or strategy of action.

**Evangelism**- defined as sacrificial service a person enters in to, preaching the gospel to believers and non-believers about the good news of God

**Homonegative**- descriptive term used for negative attitudes towards homosexuality or homosexual people from heterosexuals

**Microaggressions**- slights or insults on one's identity that can be intentional or unintentional and are verbal or nonverbal assaults

**Religious**- outwardly fulfilling the requirements (rituals and traditions) of one's faith

**Sexual Minorities**- individuals that identify as non-heterosexual such as within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus community

**Spiritual**- a re-formation that moves an individual towards meaning, peace, knowledge, understanding, hope, connectedness, growth, compassion, and wholeness that is personal and unique to all persons

**The Gospel**- the literal word of God as written in scriptures

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Same-sex sexuality is currently one of the most controversial topics of discussion among religious institutions. National debates about matters of same-sex sexuality among religious denominations have been widely examined (Butler 1999, Cadge 2002, Koch and Curry 2000, Udis-Kessler 2002; Wood 2000). As individual views in the United States are shifting towards greater inclusion, recent research has demonstrated positive shifts (i.e. more acceptance) in attitudes on matters of same-sex sexuality across various mainline religious groups (Jones 2013). Despite the increase of acceptance nationally towards same-sex sexuality, intolerance within the Black Church against those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) continues to persist. Over time, research has confirmed the negative and sometimes hostile attitudes concerning matters of homosexuality among the Black Church denominations and among its congregants (Jackson, 1983; Comstock, 1996; Morris, 1990; Ellingson, Tebbe, Haitsma, and Lauman 2001). Known for its civic and social responses, the Black Church has stood at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, demanded equality for African American neighborhoods, and served as the information and meeting hub impacting various aspects of African American life (Taylor, Thornton, and Chatters 1987). Kelly Douglas (2006) describes the Black Church as inconsistent and hypocritical for being willing to stand up for racial injustices, but repressive concerning rights for non-heterosexual persons. Regardless of its role in the formation of the African American community, for decades the Black Church has held more pronounced negative views towards non-heterosexuals as compared to other religious groups (Douglas 1999; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Griffin 2006; Collins 2004; Lemelle and Battle 2004; Jenkins, Lambert, and Baker 2009). Despite proclaiming the church is not homophobic,

the Black Church (based on national statistics) has become the face of resistance among U.S. religious groups on issues related to the LGB community (Masci and Lipka 2015).

Herek (2000) posits ideological and religious beliefs stigmatizing non-heterosexual behavior has been a source of contention within the Black Church. While scholars have debated whether African Americans truly hold more negative attitudes towards matters of same-sex sexuality compared to other religious groups (Bonilla and Porter 1990; Negy and Russell 2005; Schulte and Battle 2008; Gay and Lynxwiler 2009), data from Pew Research from 2007-2015 have consistently demonstrated a strong correlation- finding the Black Church to hold the most negative attitudes towards matters of same-sex sexuality. Alston (1974) stated African Americans expressed more condemnation of same-sex sexuality than whites. The significance of the Black Church in the African American community makes the church teachings and religious experience particularly influential. In the African American community, the Black Church often impacts what social and community norms and values are defined and accepted (Quinn and Dickson-Gomez 2015). In recent years, outsiders have criticized the Black Church for its harsh stance on homosexuality and the treatment LGB individuals receive within and from the institution.

While African Americans have demonstrated support towards gay civil liberties (Valera and Taylor 2010), LGB individuals in the Black Church frequently find themselves listening to messages and sermons laced with homophobia. Many denominations within the Black Church publicly articulate statements condemning non-heterosexual behavior and lifestyles, while LGB individuals continue to actively participate in local congregations (Adler 2012). As one of the most important institutions in the African American community, the Black Church has been seen as oppressive to LGB members. Sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, and bisexual

individuals often experience homonegativity within the Black Church. This creates a dissonance between their religious beliefs and sexual orientation. This dissonance is often resolved by LGB individuals developing an individualized sense of spirituality, ignoring certain religious texts, changing religions, changing churches, or abandoning religion completely (Schuck and Liddle 2001; Thummas 1991; Yip 2005). Non-heterosexual individuals disproportionately encounter negative experiences in the Black Church. As such, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals often feel stigmatized by their own religion (Thumma 1991; White 1994; Wolkomir 2006; Yip 1997).

There has been concern among some scholars over the religious oppression LGB individuals experience by clergy and congregations (Schuck and Liddle 2001). In the Black Church, religious and membership benefits do not always extend to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals as the environment is characterized by stigmatizing actions, homonegative rhetoric, and discrimination (Altman, Aggleton, Knog, Reddy, Harrad, Reis and Parker 2012). Even though recent research explores the distinct experiences of LGBT individuals around religion and faith; most research focuses on studying the LGB population as a sexual minority intersecting with sociopolitical trends such as same-sex marriage, HIV/AIDS, mental health (Rodriguez, Lytle, and Vaughn 2013). Although previous research is broad in scope, little is known about the lived experience of LGB individuals attending the Black Church. Rodriguez, Lytle, and Vaughn (2013) stated that future exploration is needed to examine the complex relationship between LGB individuals and their religious experience to investigate varying levels of privilege and oppression. Additionally, Jeffries, Dodge, and Sandfort (2008) suggested that future research should focus on and/or include the religious experience of LGB individuals.

The proposed study takes an in-depth phenomenological and intersectional examination of the lived experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals that attended a denomination within the Black Church. By exploring the multifaceted experience of LGBs in Black Church, this research gathers narratives to reveal how, why, and when the religious institution impacts their life. This research has the opportunity to provide insight into the unique religious experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual congregants in the Black Church and will contribute to the gaps in the literature concerning sexual minorities. Additionally, this study will allow researchers to gain a better understanding specifically of the impact and influence of the Black Church in the lives of LGB individuals.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Black Church**

W.E.B. DuBois (1903) posited, the Negro church served as “the central organ of organized life for the American Negro, a preserver of morals and served as the authority on what was good and right for the Negro community” (pg. 6). Taylor and Chatters (1999) asserted the Black Church establishment served as the one institution for the African American community where access would not be denied because of the color of one’s skin. The church was the first institution within the African American community and it greatly influenced the people of the communities it served. Serving as the oldest institution, the Black Church has served as a place of refuge, created group solidarity, black consciousness, and has shaped the African American community (Shockley 1974). As a result, the African American community developed around the Black Church (Shockley 1987). Since African Americans were denied access to public spaces and civic institutions, the Black Church has served as everything from banks, meeting spaces, job training centers and schools (Harris 2008). At times being the primary educational institution in the African American community, the Black Church embodies a rich history full of customs and teachings that have been meaningful for many generations. Furthermore, it is the Black Church that has served as a source of support, pride, tradition, strength and empowerment for the African American community for decades (Isaac, Rowland and Blackwell 2007).

Serving over 16 million people a year, the traditional Black Church is not just one church body, but is a collection of seven major denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention USA, and

Progressive National Baptist Convention (Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, and Bradford 2000). Within these seven denominations the Black Church is diverse in character, with distinct differences, which include: theological tradition, style of worship, music, urban/rural location, size, and socioeconomic status (Ward 2005). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) acknowledged the Black Church has the same general organization structure of rituals and beliefs as other churches, however African American Christians give different emphasis to theological views. Additionally, Steensland et al. (2000) acknowledged the Black Church is fundamentally different from other religious groups because of the historic nature of religion within the African American community.

The Black Church religious experience has been described as more emotionally expressive and intricate compared to other religious institutions. Examining the effects of the Black Church as compared to the role of other religious institutions, Schulte and Battle (2008) found the Black Church is a more integral part in the community of its members. Because of this, Schulte and Battle (2008) posited the ideologies, values, and teachings of the Black Church have great influence on the everyday lives of all African Americans. Religion continues to be culturally significant in the African American community and the Black Church has played a pivotal role in creating that foundation. Because the Black Church is the foundation of the African American community (Nelsen and Nelsen 1975) serving as the one institution in the community funded, built and owned by African Americans, this group has a greater level of religious commitment than Whites (Krause and Hayward 2015). Considering all that the Black Church represents, the attitudes and views of African Americans will mirror its Church. The positions African Americans' take on societal issues will reflect the Black Church, more so than White Americans' attitudes from their White church (Schulte and Battle 2008). Lincoln and



Mamiya (1990) posited the Black Church influence is so potent it permeates on many levels within the African American community.

### **Homonegativity in the Black Church**

A significant correlation exists between level of religiosity and negative attitudes and behaviors towards homosexuality (Gibbs and Goldbach 2015; Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, Tsang 2009). As a result, LGBT individuals that grow up in a religious community or regularly attend church services can experience increased occurrences of homonegativity. Despite being a major source of support and empowerment for the African American community, the traditional Black Church has been a place of homonegativity and pain for many individuals that identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Research has shown lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals that constantly hear homonegative messages in church begin to have internalized homophobia (Ream 2001; Ritter and O'Neil 1989). Internalized homophobia can be described as turning anti-gay messages and social attitudes towards the self, which can lead the individual to have internal conflicts negotiating their sexual identity (Meyer and Dean 1998). Scholars have suggested many LGBT individuals have abandoned the Black Church due to homonegative experiences (Jeffries, Dodge, Sandfort 2008; Oswald 2001; Sweasey 1997, Yip 1999). Homonegativity in the African American community can hinder an individual's willingness to come out, because doing so could impact family, religious, and personal relationships. The condemnation LGBT individuals encounter in the Black Church has resulted in them often living closeted lives, projecting a heterosexual religious identity, and relying on their personal faith in God rather than a religious institutions-identifying as spiritual, but not religious (Jeffries et al. 2008; Ritter and O'Neil 1989; Sweasey 1997; Ward 2005).

In the United States, religion has often been used to justify mistreatment of groups or communities (Farajaje-Jones 1993), just as Christianity was used to give validity to slavery, the Black Church uses religion to condemn lesbians, gay and bisexuals (Boykin 1996; Griffin 2006). For the Black Church the Bible is often used to generate and support homonegativity. For example, pastors have been known to use certain scriptures to prove to their congregations that homosexuality is a sin (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Ward 2005). One scripture often cited is Leviticus 18:22 “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind- it is an abomination has been used in many sermons to denounce homosexuality (Walker and Longmire 2012). The homonegativity LGBT individuals experience in the Black Church can make it difficult for them to reconcile their sexual identity (Quinn and Dickson-Gomez 2015). In a study on African American gay men and self-esteem, Stokes and Peterson (1998) found the constant exposure of homonegative messages in church resulted in participants wanting to change their sexual orientation because the Pastor said they were going to hell because homosexuality is a sin. Yip (1998) posits individuals that are constantly exposed to homonegative views or are raised in intolerant religious institutions often suffer from depression, self-doubt, and worthlessness. A 2008 study by Jeffries et al. (2008) examined the lived experience of bisexual black men in the Black Church and found participants non-heterosexual identity were unaccepted within their religious institutions. Furthermore, research data revealed participants remarked going to great length to hide their sexuality, being unable to talk about their bisexuality with other church members and knowing it would be a major issue if they came out to the congregation (Jeffries et al. 2008). Yet despite the homonegativity participants encountered in the Jeffries et al. (2008) study, they were still actively involved in the Black Church. A study on gay men resolving internalized homophobia, reported participants often questioned their goodness as a human being

because of the constant homonegative messages spoke by not only the church pastor, but by fellow church members (Kubicek, McDavitt, Carpineto, Weiss, Iverson and Kipke (2009). In addition to constantly hearing homonegative messages, non-heterosexuals often encounter microaggressions and gossip within the Black Church and African American community (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez and Kelly 2016). Marks (2005) identifies the condemnation homosexuals experience in the Black Church, serves as an attempt for the community to maintain values, norms and regulate behavior.

### **Religion and Attitudes towards Homosexuality**

Since the founding of America, religion and religious institutions have influenced many aspects of society. Pargament and Maton (2000), described religion as having a widespread, multilayered presence that impacts all of society in some form. Religion and religious institutions often help individuals find a sense of belonging and develop personal and social identities. Religious institutions promote a body of beliefs among its members creating congregations with common thoughts, morals, and values (Berger 1967; Johnstone 1975). Historically churches have pushed a heterosexual marriage and celibacy religious agenda (Ellingson, Tebbe, Haitsma, and Laumann 2001). Among the traditional hetero-normative religious community, as defined by Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson and Bradford (2000), same-sex sexuality has generally been a sinful topic. While the moral stigma associated with same-sex sexuality is still prevalent, societal attitudes are shifting and some American religious groups are beginning to be less condemning of non-heterosexuals (Schulte and Battle 2008). According to a recent opinion poll, 47% of Americans favor same-sex marriage, which represents an increase from 28% in 2003 (PRRI 2015). Additionally, 62% of White mainline Protestants, 53% of White mainline Baptists

and 50% of White mainline Church of Christ denominations support same-sex marriage (PRRI 2015). This is compared to 54% of African American Protestants that are opposed to legalizing same-sex marriage (it is important to note 72% of White Evangelical Baptists are also opposed to same-sex marriage) (PRRI 2015). Extensive religious involvement within the Black Church for African Americans has served as a major medium for the transmission of fundamental religious beliefs. Through attendance at worship services, Black Church congregants learn religious principles and tenets from scripture readings, sermons, songs and prayers (Krause and Hayward 2015). These principles provide congregants with greater confidence in their faith and reinforce religious commitment, religious theology, and religious beliefs.

Bader and Froese (2005) defined religious beliefs as believing there is a God that exists and that God is the object of worship and devotion. Bader and Froese (2005) suggest investigating the impact of religious beliefs can lead to determining if there is a direct relationship between religious beliefs held and individual attitudes/behaviors. Other scholars have also proposed using religious belief to measure religious commitment and to gain an understanding of behaviors that occur as a result of religious affiliation (Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Iannaccone 1991). While the number of individuals that identify as believing God exists is decreasing among religious denominations such as mainline Protestants, Jewish and Catholics, according to the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, for African American Protestants the number of believers is holding steady. Making African American Protestants more likely to believe in the absolute existence in God among religious groups. Accordingly the national average provides 88% of religious African Americans believe in God, compared to 61% of religious White (Pew 2015). Additionally, considering African Americans as a whole (religious and non-religious), they are more likely than Whites, and Hispanics to believe God

exists (Lipka 2015). For many American, the traditions and teachings within their religious institution plays a crucial role in defining socially acceptable forms of behavior, values and norms (Bahr and Chadwick 1985). Researchers have concluded the strongest predictor of heterosexual attitudes towards homosexuality is religiosity (Battle 2004; Douglas 2000; Blaxton 1998; Boykin 1996).

VanderSteop and Green (1988) documented the relationship between one's religious beliefs and heterosexism, finding conservative religious teachings about God produced conservative ethics that posits homosexuality is a sin. Examining the effects of religious beliefs on moral attitudes and behaviors, Bader and Froese (2005) found beliefs about God varied across religious denominations, but discovered African Americans Protestants held the most authoritarian image of God compared to other religious groups (White mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish). A denominations belief in God is a significant predictor of attitudes towards sexual morality (Bader and Froese 2005). Accordingly, Schulte and Battle (2008) found churches that teach conservative religious philosophies contribute to the development of heterosexism. The historically African American Protestant group is the most religiously devoted denomination within the Black Church tradition; with 78% of religious African Americans identifying as Protestant compared to 51% of Whites (Pew 2009). Because of this, religious African Americans are more likely to be engaged with the Black Church and more likely to report intolerance towards issues of same-sex sexuality (Masci and Lipka 2015). Exploring attitudes towards homosexuality across religious groups Schnabel (2016) found African American Protestants demonstrate more conservative attitudes towards same-sex sexuality than White mainline Protestants and Catholics. In the United States, religion continues to be one of

the biggest influences that holds some Americans back from supporting issues and legislation related to same-sex sexuality.

### **Impact of Religiosity in the Black Church**

Jagers and Smith (1996) found African Americans take a more fundamental approach to religion as compared to White Americans, resulting in them being less likely to question the religious teachings of the Black Church. One reason the Black Church has had such a great influence on African Americans is due to the level of religiosity that exists among its congregants. Research studies, for decades, have demonstrated African Americans express a greater degree of religiosity as compared to other religious groups (Gallup 1987; Krause 2006; Levin, Chatters and Taylor 1994, Taylor and Chatters 2011). As a result, African Americans have been labeled as very religious group. Over time, research has demonstrated African Americans have become increasingly more religious than any other racial group. In 1978, the Quality of American Life study found 30% of African Americans identified as religious, compared to 16% of Whites. In 1986, 80% of African Americans identified religion was very important, compared to 52% of Whites (American Changing Lives). Taylor, Thornton, and Chatter (1998) found higher rates of religiosity, which included higher frequency of church attendance and prayer, greater church involvement and higher levels of participating in church activities to be the highest factor among African Americans as compared to any other racial or ethnic groups.

Exploring the effects of religiosity, Negy and Eisenman (2005) discovered for African Americans their faith and frequency of church attendance predicted negative attitudes towards lesbians and gays. Congregants of the Black Church also expressed greater confidence in their

religious institution than other religious groups expressed of their churches (Hoffman 1998). The confidence congregants experience from attending the Black Church can be attributed to the higher level of religious involvement African Americans have in their church. African Americans were also more likely to occupy formal leadership roles within the church more often than Whites (Krause 2006). Research also discovered within the Black Church, African Americans developed stronger social support networks than found in White church congregations (Krause 2002). Berger (1967) purports ongoing social processes help to maintain religious beliefs. As a result of being considered more religious, based on factors of religiosity, Taylor et al. (1998) recognized African Americans are more likely than other religious groups to incorporate religion into their everyday life. Also compared to other groups, African Americans exhibit greater levels of public and private religious behaviors (Chatters and Taylor 1998).

A Religious Landscape Survey found 85% of African Americans identified religion as being very important in their lives (6% increase from 2009), compared to the national average of 53% (3% decrease from 2009) (Pew 2015). As a result, African Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation. Even 72% of African Americans respondents surveyed identifying as unaffiliated with a religious denomination, stated religion plays a somewhat important role in their life (Pew 2009). Researchers have found religiosity has been the consistent indicator found to explain attitudes positive or negative towards matters of same-sex sexuality (Gay and Lynxwiler 2009, Glassner & Owen 1976; Herek 2000; Schulte and Battle 2008). Even when religious affiliation is removed, African Americans still demonstrate a greater commitment to their faith. On average 47 percent of African Americans attend religious services at least once a week compared to 34 percent of religious Whites and 80 percent of religious African Americans pray daily, compared to 52% of religious Whites (Pew 2015). A

2015 Pew Research Center report identified 56% of Hispanics and 59% of Whites favor same-sex marriage, however 51% of African Americans remain opposed to gays and lesbians having the legal right to marry. Survey research consistently shows the following three religious factors: (1) active religious participation, (2) frequent exposure to religious literature and (3) regular interaction with religious friends lead to and encourage negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009; Olson, Cadge, Harrison 2006; Sherkat and Ellison 1997). African Americans, compared to Whites, have been found to be more committed to their religious faith (Krause and Hayward 2015). As a result, the Black Church responds to matters of same-sex sexuality differently from other religious institutions and groups.

### **Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Black Church Religious Experience**

The Black Church ranks as the most intolerant religious institution (Pitt 2010). Many religious denominations are intolerant of sexual minorities, condemning their same-sex behavior and even refusing to conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies (Morrow 2003; Sherkat 2002; Clark, Brown and Hochstein 1990). This intolerance has often resulted in LGB individuals turning away from the Black Church due to homonegative messages from the church pastor, stigmatization, discrimination and a multitude of other negative experiences. Six out of seven denominations under the Black Church have taken a public position against homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Pew 2015). The Progressive National Baptist Convention is the only denomination that has decided not to take an official position, but instead allow the local congregations to determine their stance on the issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

For decades, the African American community has been reluctant to embrace the LGBT community, often using religious beliefs as justification for the condemnation and judgment. A



2013, Pew Research Center survey found 31% African Americans discourage homosexuality. The Bible (also referred to as ‘The Good Book’) has an influential position in the Black Church (Wilmore 1994). The Bible provides moral guidelines and informs congregations on how to live daily, what behaviors are acceptable and how one should treat others. When discussing the importance of scripture in Black Church culture Pattillo-McCoy (1998) provides “scriptures mere words themselves, along with their performative delivery say something about the way members of the group will frame receive and act upon an issue” (pg. 769). Author Aaron Anson (2011), posits as whites used the Bible to defend slavery, the Black Church is now using it to suppress and shun those in the LGBT community.

While some LGB individuals do have affirming religious experiences within the Black Church, most do not. Henrickson (2009) provides in traditional religions, estrangement between church authority and LGB individuals usually develops. Often times for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals that attend the Black Church they have negative experiences with hearing homophobic sermons and messages from the pulpit. Researchers have found constantly being exposed to homophobic messages have been associated with one’s inability to reconcile their sexual orientation and spiritual/religious identity (Halkitis, Moeller, Siconolfi 2009; Heermann, Wiggins and Rutter 2007).

Schuck and Liddle (2001) in a study of religious conflicts experienced by LGB individuals found two main sources of conflict indicated by participants, was the bible being used to condemn homosexuality and religious teachings/preaching against homosexuality. Foster, Arnold, Rebchook and Kegeles (2011) surveyed African American men who have sex with men and the role religion and spirituality played in their lives and revealed among this group the importance of spirituality, experiences of stigma and homophobia in the traditional

Black Church, tensions between sexual identity and religious identity as a Christian, and the impact of religion and spirituality on sense of personal empowerment and coping abilities. Foster et al. 2011, also found 96% of participants expressed hearing stories of anti-gay rhetoric being delivered from the church pastor. Furthermore, Foster et al. (2011) posited men in their study continued to have a desire to be a part of a Christian community despite not being able to tolerate the homophobic messages and being stigmatized in their place of worship.

LGB individuals in the Black Church find their identities (social and sexual) shaped, tested, and rejected, but rarely accepted. Research data suggest religious institutions are most oppressive to those that identify as LGBT (Pitt 2010). As a coping strategy, LGBT individuals often downplay their sexual identities in the Black Church in order to worship without discrimination and avoid being socially excluded (Chaney and Patrick 2011). In 2015, Black Entertainment Television released *Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church*, which provided a glimpse into today's religious experience for African American LGBT individuals in the Black Church. The documentary included LGBT church members admitting to attending and serving in the Black Church, but being careful to conceal their sexual identity for fear of being kicked out of the church (Juzwaik 2015). Additionally, the director of the documentary indicated a need for lesbians, gays and bisexuals to tell of their experience in the Black Church without the African American homophobic perspective from the pastor overshadowing their voices (Juzwaik 2015). Collard (1998) acknowledged being authentic with one's homosexual identity requires the individual to move beyond oppressive environments and experiences.

In a qualitative study Sandra Barnes (2013), conducted focus groups with 35 African American clergy to examine how Black Church culture informs views on homosexuality discovering while the church is a welcoming institution to all, views diverge when determining if

lesbians and gays should be able to openly worship. One pastor from Barnes (2013) study described the concept of an ‘open closet’, explaining the Black Church is an environment where lesbians and gays can attend, but will never be accepted for who they are or be able to hold church leadership roles. King (2004) posited for the Black Church having LGBT individuals in leadership roles will be problematic and disruptive to the church culture. The clergy’s statement supports the unspoken rule of “don’t ask, don’t tell” that exists in the Black Church, where LGBT individuals can enjoy full church membership as long as they do not publicly share or show their sexual non-heterosexual identity (Boykin 1996).

Scholars have found LGBT individuals that endure this type of Black Church experience suffer socially, spiritually, and emotionally (Griffin 2006; Ward 2005). In a study exploring experiences of intersectionality among African American gay and bisexual men and religion, Bowleg (2013) provided through participant narratives their experiences reflected the interlocking of multiple social identities that were in conflict with each other. Research scholar, Marjorie Hill (2013) found when examining perceptions in the African American community about homophobia, LGBT individuals are often positioned between a ‘rock’ having to choose one identity over the other, and a ‘hard place’ rejecting a part of oneself.

### **Pastoral Influence**

Within the Black Church the most authoritative figures are the clergy (or pastor as they are also called). Since the establishment of the Black Church, the pastor has had three primary areas of focus, (1) preaching the word, (2) meeting the basic needs of congregations, and (3) responding to the needs of the African American community (Kolchin 1993). Scholar W.E.B DuBois (1903) in *Souls of Black Folk* asserted, “The Preacher is the most unique personality

developed by the Negro American soil. A leader, politician, an orator, a boss, an intriguer, an idealist- all these he is..." (p.134). Serving as elected spiritual officials, pastor's in the Black Church greatly influence not only church congregants, but also the African American community as a whole. Black Church pastors provide advocacy, wisdom, biblical and worldly knowledge, prayer, and other tangible and spiritual resources. Research has demonstrated clergy's authority and stance impacts how a church congregation constructs, processes, and responds to homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Adler 2012; Ammerman 1997; Cadge and Wildeman 2008; Coffin 2005). Recognizing the historical influence of the pastor within the Black Church, these men and women significantly influence attitudes and public discourse about a variety of social, civic and political issues. Despite the nature of their role, not all clergy have been very involved in discussions about matters of homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). In a study Djupe and Gilbert (2002) found only 80% of clergy in mainline Protestant religious groups have discussed homosexuality within their congregation.

Though clergy from the Black Church have been at the forefront of civil and social activism, they often draw the line with supporting same-sex marriage, often criticizing and attacking homosexuality from the pulpit (Fone 2000, Toulouse 2002). How a pastor responds to norms related to homosexuality and same-sex marriage can be different than other social issues. Adler (2012) discovered churches with an African American head clergy were only half as likely to have openly welcoming congregations for lesbians and gays. Through her investigation Barnes (2013) found the Black Church has a double standard when dealing with issues of morality- the church will embrace an unwed mother, but condemn a lesbian. Despite the fact that both have committed sins according to the Bible, one sin being a lesbian is looked down as

worse than having a child out of wedlock or having premarital sex (both of which the Bible warns against).

The Black Church can and does tolerate sinful behavior among congregants that serve in critical roles within the operation of the church. Barnes (2013) describes this concession being made is to sustain key cultural experiences in the Black Church. Herek and Capitanio (1995) claimed; views of African Americans towards homosexuals are “theoretically interesting because they represent the reactions of one societal out-group towards members of another” (p.95). While clergy in the Black Church do have agency related to what is and is not discussed in the church, they can also be constrained by the opinions of their congregation (Nieheisel and Djupe 2008). Cadge and Wildeman (2008) examined thirty mainline Protestant clergy to determine how they addressed homosexuality with their congregations and found clergy expressed fear over alienating congregants, misinterpreting scriptures and framing gays and lesbians wrong. Chaney and Patrick (2010) investigated the disconnect between the African American LGBT community and the Black Church, specifically the Black Mega Church and discovered while the Black Mega Church provides support ministries where sexuality is irrelevant, it refuses to accept or acknowledge the LGBT population within its church. Chaney and Patrick (2010) suggests the language used by and within the Black Church erases the existence of the LGBT community among its membership. Cadge, Girouard, Olson and Lylrohr (2012) conducted interviews with forty Christian clergy to analyze expressions of uncertainty in clergy perspectives on homosexuality, these researchers discovered seven in ten clergy expressed uncertainty about their personal beliefs and/or actions about homosexuality. Clergy also expressed uncertainty about whether or how to publicly welcome gay people and if blessings can be given to same-sex relationships (Cadge et al. 2012).

## CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religion alone is complex and seeking to study sexual minorities' relationship with a religious institution like the Black Church, calls for a holistic approach (Toft 2009). For years sexual minorities have been under-studied; rarely have researchers investigated the intersection of religious identity, sexual orientation, and the stigma associated within a religious institution (Jefferies, Dodge, and Sandfort 2008). As a result this study will employ theoretical integration, which according to Hempel (1966), offers the researcher a systematic opportunity to account for a diverse phenomenon. Theoretical integration was primarily used in the study of crime and deviance, but since has become common in social science research (Messner, Krohn and Liska 1989; Muehlenkamp, Hilt, Ehlinger, and McMillan 2015). It is relevant for this study to view the LGB Black Church experience from two different, yet complimentary theoretical frameworks: Patricia Hill Collins' theory of Intersectionality and Erving Goffman's Stigma.

Unger (2001:32) posits from the feminist perspective "the personal is political and individuals are the experts of their own experiences." This study examines the intersecting and stigmatizing multiple identities of LGB's within the Black Church. Intersectionality allows the current study to consider how one's multiple identities contribute to their experiences and interactions in the Black Church. Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) posit that the environment impacts an individual's experience and using intersectionality [feminist view point] can be used to emphasize how social and cultural norms facilitate or impede an individual's identities. Additionally, stigma will provide the opportunity to investigate the impact the Black Church's attitudes, behavior, and culture have on individual experiences. Therefore examining

respondents' experiences from both an Intersectionality and Stigma lens will provide a holistic examination of the simultaneous impact of sexual identity development, religious beliefs, and sociocultural experiences in the Black Church.

### **Intersectionality**

Within Western society, sexuality matters. It is used to define gender roles and aids in the reproduction of our social interactions with each other (D'Emilio and Faderman 1998; Tiefer 2004). As the social landscape for sexual minorities is shifting towards greater acceptance in the U.S., LGB individuals are seeking to fully integrate their sexual identities into all facets of their social lives including work, religion, and family (Seidman 2002). Research data explain that affirming (Barnes 2013; Bowleg 2013; Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Fraizer 2005) and non-affirming (Chaney and Patrick 2010) religious experiences predict whether LGB individuals will integrate their sexual identity with their religious beliefs. For LGB's that identify as Christian, this integration can mean negotiating two opposing identities (sexual and religious) that are often culturally incompatible within some religious denominations (O'Brien 2004; Wilcox 2003). According to Woodell, Kazyak, and Compton (2015), Christian LGB's often find themselves caught between conflicting views related to church culture, church theology, and their sexual identity.

Religion has been deemed a powerful force in the U.S., possessing the ability to include or exclude people. Christianity has been associated with constructing social norms, morals, and expectations for society (Joshi 2009). Although the Black Church is seen as a pillar in the African American community, it does not always serve as a place of safety and support for LGB's. In spite of opposition from the Black Church, LGB's continue to adopt Christian beliefs,

participate in church rituals, and are active in the church community (Barnes 2013; Boykin 2007; Walton 2006; Dyson 2003). The experiences of those that attend the Black Church and identify as LGB should be examined as interconnected. As such, this research uses an intersectional approach to examine how a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual's sexuality and religion (and potentially race and gender) intersect to shape their specific experience in the Black Church. Employing an intersectional approach to researching sexual minorities emphasizes the significance of understanding how one's religious identity might impact their sexual identity (Woodell et al. 2015).

The study and application of intersectionality has increased significantly over the past 15 years (Hankivsky 2014; McCall 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006; Bunjun 2010) and has been proposed as a theory, paradigm, and methodology. Intersectionality has become an important theoretical framework for research scholars and has yielded tremendous contributions of knowledge to the study of marginalized social groups. Intersectionality has been used to understand the multi-dimensional ways race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape an individual's life experiences. Critical Race and Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to describe how African American women were constantly being erased by the use of dominant conceptualizations of single-axis frameworks that did not consider the impact of race and sex on one's life experience in society. Crenshaw (1989) argued that individuals hold multiple identities and thus can experience multiple oppressions that are interlocking creating one synthesized experience. Intersectionality proposes that the researcher examine systematic oppressions in society that devalue the lived experiences and knowledge from the marginalized individual perspective and standpoint. Intersectionality also disputes the idea that groups (such as



women, lesbians, African Americans) are homogeneous categories sharing essentially the same life experiences.

Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) extended intersectionality, proposing it be used to examine how various biological, social, and cultural identities interact on multiple and simultaneous levels impacting individuals. Additionally, Collins (1990) argued that race, class, and gender significantly influence an individual's life experience. It is that life experience that produces unique knowledge and allows the researcher to add diverse narratives to social science research (Collins 1990). Intersectionality also acknowledges the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and belief-based bigotry) do not act independently of one another. Intersectionality examines how multiple social identities (e.g. gender, race, sexual identity) intersect exposing multiple interlocking social inequalities (Browne and Mirsa 2003; Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989). Scholars posit that it is at the intersections of a person's multiple identities that research is able to understand the person's full and true reality in society (Harding 2004; Browne and Mirsa 2003; Nagel 2003; Weigman 1995). Taking an intersectional approach also avoids placing one "ism" above another and recognizes that individuals experience their identities differently depending on their social location within institutions (Veenstra 2011). For example, LGB members experience the Black Church differently compared to heterosexual members due to their social location in the religious structure. Intersectionality asserts the social identities and categories that describe a person matter equally (Hancock 2007). Scholars have observed that religiosity should be studied as intersecting with other social classifications (Emerson, Korver-Gleen, and Douds 2015; Reimer-Kirkman, Sharma and Cochrane 2009; Hankivsky and Cormier 2009; Ellison 1991; Bagley 1970). Intersectionality suggests interaction among an individual's multiple identity

characteristics (e.g. religion, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity) are so intertwined they cannot be separated (Cole 2009).

Sociologists past and present have applied intersectionality to study the different intersections of group membership and marginalization in society. Scholars such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981) emphasized intersectionality to explore how sexual orientation, class, race, and gender create multiple identities to inform individual perspectives, challenging white feminist claims of solidarity within the women's movement. Intersectional scholars Maxine Zinn and Bonnie Dill (1996) argue a unitary investigation of sexuality and gender produces research that does not adequately address or reveal the holistic experience of the individual. Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) state that one's sexual minority identity is influenced by the multiple environments the person encounters. For instance, Ritter and O'Neill (1989) discovered gays and lesbians that identified within a Judeo-Christian denomination believed they must choose between their religious identity and their sexual orientation identity. These participants believed their two identities could not mutually exist for them within their church (Ritter and O'Neill 1989). Additionally, Jefferies, Dodge, and Sandfort (2008) found when exploring the lived experiences of bisexual African American men, participants believed their sexual identity would not be accepted within the Black Church community and thus chose to keep it hidden. Jones (2008) in studying the religio-spirituality of college students during the coming out process, found African American students often had internal debates about whether they should leave their church, abandon their religious beliefs, or remain closeted to their family and church.

The experience of all congregants that attend the Black Church is not universal and each person occupies a different position and has a different personal history. However, for

individuals that identify as religious and LGB, their experience in the Black Church can come with a substantial amount of struggle due to the marginalization of their sexual identity within this particular church environment. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) discovered when examining the impact of ethnicity among individuals during the coming out process, African Americans were more uncomfortable than whites and Hispanics of others knowing their sexual identity. Rosario et al. (2004) also found African American LGB's had limited social support and often stay closeted longer. Christian LGB's that do not want to reject their religious identity or sexual identity will seek to attend gay affirming churches, hoping to fully integrate both of their identities without experiences of homonegativity. However, Krista McQueeney's (2009) study of race, gender, and sexuality in lesbian and gay affirming congregations, discovered among her LGB research participants, that all faced internal conflict between their Christian and sexual identity even when attending an affirming church.

Previous studies have demonstrated how religion, religious practices, and institutions are interconnected with a person's lived experiences (Van Herk, Smith and Andrews 2011; Bilge 2010; Kuokkanen 2008; Williams 2008). From an intersectional perspective, the lived experiences of individuals are formed by multiple social dynamics and factors, making people's lives complex (Hankivsky 2014). Furthermore, to better understand many facets of social life, scholars have identified the importance of examining how a person experiences multiple forms of oppressions because of their identities in society (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2004; Battle and Barnes 2010; Lemelle 2010). Because religion has been understudied using an intersectional framework, the specific LGB experience as it relates to the Black Church is not well understood. In 2016, support for same-sex marriage among African American Protestants held steady at 39%, but this group still remains less accepting compared to other religious groups (Pew Forum on

Religion and Public Life 2016). In the Black Church LGB's may experience homonegative messages, microaggressions, and community gossip that add to the stigma of being considered among a sexual minority group (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, and Kelly 2016).

### **Stigma**

For decades, leaders of religious institutions have characterized those that identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) as sexual deviants and sinners, stigmatizing homosexuality as against God's will for mankind (Winder 2015; Barnes 2013; Pitt 2010). Evidence from prior qualitative studies identified that most LGB church members experience high levels of stigma as a result of their sexual identity and same-sex behavior (Valera and Taylor 2010; Harawa, Williams, Ramamurthi, Manago, Avina, Jones 2008; Miller 2005; Kraft, Beeker, Stokes and Peterson 2000). Stigma as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman (1963), is an attribute or behavior that causes an individual or group to be rejected, alienated, or classified by others as undesirable. Among the seven denominations that make-up the Black Church, six have publicly condemned homosexuality and have created environments where non-heterosexuals feel inferior. Because homosexuality has been conceptualized as a stigmatized identity, church congregants often hear negative messages and sermons encouraging sexual minorities to conform to respectable behavior. Orne (2013) posits that the stigma that comes with identifying as homosexual has resulted in many keeping their sexual identities hidden and some alter their behavior to conform to heterosexual standards and norms. These experiences can lead to potential conflicts between religious and sexual identities for LGB's who find religion and/or church attendance important (Pitt 2010; Johnson 2008; Ward 2005). As a result, often times

religious sexual minorities will choose to “stay closeted” in religious environments because they fear being stigmatized or ostracized by others.

Researchers have argued that the Black Church religious environment is more homophobic than any other religious environment (Winder2015; Lewis 2003; Glick and Golden 2010; Gay and Lynxwiler 2009). Over the years, the Black Church has been guilty of perpetuating and maintaining stigma against homosexuals with clergy delivering anti-gay sermons (Tucker-Worgs and Worgs 2014; Foster, Arnold, Rebchock, and Kegeles 2011; Rawls 2010), supporting traditional gender roles (Pitt 2010), and opposing same-sex legislation (Monroe 2010; Ellingson, Tebbe, Van Haitsma, and Laumann 2001). Although the church can give the appearance of being a safe and sacred place, for LGB’s the Black Church in particular can be a source of pain, fear, and stress because of the stigma they experience due to their sexual identity (Bowleg 2013; Odum and Vernon-Feagans 2010; Hammond and Mattis 2005; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Goffman’s (1963) theory on stigma management provides a theoretical framework to better understand the relationship lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have between their sexual identity and religious identity within the Black Church. Goffman (1963) uses stigma to acknowledge how persons are considered abnormal and are not fully socially accepted by society which results in those persons constantly adjusting their social identities to fit social standards. Stigma often involves experiences of being labeled with a lower social status in society because one’s identity is outside of acceptable societal norms (Link and Phelan 2001). Goffman (1963:3) defines stigma as an attribute that taints a person from being viewed, as “the stereotypical standard of what a given type of individual should be.” Stigmatized individuals navigate society with a discredited identity and shame, but continually seeking acceptance (Barnes 2013). As such, an individual

must often negotiate their stigmatized identities with their personal concept of self, battling the “discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity” (Goffman 1963:3).

Goffman (1963) also posited that when interacting in a stigmatized environment, people often construct an identity that hides stigmatized characteristics to normalize their identities and maintain group membership. According to Goffman (1963) there are three types of social stigma one can experience; stigma related to a physical attribute (e.g. physical deformity, obesity, etc.), (2) blemishes of individual character (e.g. school dropout, criminal background, alcoholism, sexual minority, etc.), and (3) tribal stigma (e.g. stigma related to one’s race, religion, ethnicity, etc.). For this research I will only focus on the stigma attached to blemishes of individual character (e.g. identifying as LGB). Individuals that experience stigma related to a blemish of individual character do so at great risk to themselves (Greeff 2013). In a study of non-gay friendly environments, Della, Wilson, and Miller (2002) discovered gay males often imitate traditional masculine behavior to conceal their homosexual identity. Similarly Choi, Han, Paul, and Ayala (2011) examined 85 minority men who have sex with men (MSM) and found through interviews and focus groups that some African American MSM hide their sexual identity to protect themselves from discrimination within the larger African American community. Choi et al. (2011) also discovered the African American MSM purposely withheld their sexual identity as a way to control their image within the African American community.

Since identifying as homosexual was originally classified by the DSM-I in 1952 as a mental disorder, LGB’s employ various tactics to hide their sexual identity in unsafe environments (Barnes 2015; Boykin 2007; Seidman 2003; Griffin 2000). On one hand, LGB individuals disclose their hidden stigmatized identities as a way to gain social support and power over stigma (Legate, Ryan, and Weinstein 2012; Orne 2013). On the other hand, many persons

with a socially or culturally stigmatized identity choose to hide their identity. For example, McQueeney (2009) in an ethnographic study, observed two churches to examine the stigma experienced by African American LGBT individuals, found they attempted to separate themselves from the stigma of homosexuality by identifying how they were similar or even better than the heterosexual congregants in their church. The LGBT participants in McQueeney's (2009) study rationalized they were "different" from other homosexuals because they were 'good Christians.' They normalized their sexual identity by moralizing their Christian identity, which included projecting "monogamy, manhood, and motherhood" McQueeney (2009:157). For some LGB's, normalizing one's stigmatized sexual identity is their way of challenging the stereotype of homophobia in the Black Church.

To date, there is a significant gap in the extant research investigating the experiences of LGB's in the Black Church measuring the impact of one's sexual identity and institutional participation. Previous studies related to stigma in the Black Church community have mainly focused on sexual minorities and a disease status (Daftary 2012; Cohen 1999; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999), and sexual minorities with mental illness (Link and Phelan 2001). It is important to examine the impact of intersecting and stigmatized identities because they not only create different experiences, but also unique challenges for individuals to manage. Taking into account how central the Black Church is to the African American community, it is critical to consider how LGB's reconcile their sexual identities, religious participation, beliefs, and tension with the religious institution. This examination must "recognize the religious, sociopolitical, cultural, and historical experiences" (Rodriguez, Lytle, and Vaughan 2013:286) that have impacted lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the Black Church.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS

### The Call for Research

Growing up I attended the Black Church and I recall learning of things and human behavior that was considered to be sinful according to biblical scripture as delivered on Sunday mornings by the pastor. However as a child, I did not always understand the messages that were coming from the pulpit nor did I really know what context to put these messages in for my young Christian life. As I grew older and my church attendance continued my biblical knowledge increased, and I began to realize that there were many homophobic messages that were coming from the pulpit, despite there being individuals that identified as gay in the congregation. This was hard for me to understand, but also opened my eyes to the complexity of and within the Black Church. I could not believe that such an endearing figure in the church and community [the pastor] would hold beliefs and state things that demonized individuals that I sat in church with, my mother worked with, and individuals that contributed in many ways to my community.

Besides making me mad, the homophobic messages from the pastor pushed me to want to know and understand the *Bible* for myself. There was no way I was willing to believe that an entire population of people would go to hell and lose God's love simply because of who they are attracted to. While I do identify as a Christian, I do not buy into any homophobic messages that cause spiritual harm and creates dissonance between the religious and LGBTQ+ communities. I operate my life under the Biblical principle that God has called us (His people) above ALL else to love. This guiding belief has served me well in the work and advocacy that I do for and with the LGBTQ+ community. When I entered into the Sociology Ph.D. program in fall 2013, I knew from the start my research would be focused on matters involving the LGBTQ+ community and the many intersections of social life. Reaching back to my experience with the Black Church, I always wondered how did the gay African American males (I only knew of gay males in the Black Church) rationalize being a member but constantly hearing negative and



demonizing homophobic messages. I knew now was the time to research to better understand the impact of the Black Church on those that identified within the LGBTQ+ community. Thus this research study was birthed out of personal interest.

### **Methodological Framework**

Using Quinn and Dickson-Gomez (2015) study *Homonegativity, Religiosity, and Intersecting Identities* as a guide, I wanted to use this research study to provide an opportunity to extend the literature by gaining a better understanding of how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals negotiate their religious beliefs, church participation, and sexual identity while attending the Black Church. Like Quinn and Dickson-Gomez (2015), to gather the lived experiences of LGB's in the Black Church, I take a qualitative and intersectional approach, but I also add how Black Church stigma impacts one's experiences. Understanding qualitative research is a form of social life investigation; I used this approach to explore behavior, perspectives, interpretations, and experiences (Jacobs 1985) of those I was studying. Motivated by Unger's (2001) assertion the individual is the expert of their own experience, my goal was to learn firsthand from LGBs how their intersecting identities impacted their Black Church experience and vice versus how the Black Church impacted their sexual identity.

There are many varied approaches to using qualitative research, but for this study I chose to use the naturalist approach. Employing a naturalistic research methodology allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings behind participants lived religious experience with the Black Church (Wertz 2005). The naturalistic approach also allows the researcher to focus on obtaining the genuine, multifaceted life experiences of the LGB individuals that participate in this study.

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalist approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2004:2).

It was important to describe and understand the religious experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in the Black Church, but also to give voice to the interpretation and meaning participants gave to their experience. Considering a naturalistic approach as a process, this method is also best suited for a small sample population, and provided me an opportunity to conduct extensive interviews where participants explain the full extent of their experience. The naturalist approach also provides the researcher an opportunity to understand the social phenomena directly from the individuals experiencing it to ensure diverse voices are included in the overall narrative of the phenomena (Frey, Botan, and Kreps 1999). Educated on the role and purpose of a naturalist researcher and in consultation with my committee, I identified whom to interview, what to ask, how to record, and how to analyze the information. I then set out to acquire the rich life experiences as told by only those who have or are living it.

### **Recruitment**

According to Thomas and Pollio (2002) it is important that research participants have experience with the phenomenon being studied and be willing to provide their experience. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and knowing that not all those that identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are 'out' employing traditional methods of advertising (flyers, church announcements, etc.) to solicit for research participants would not yield much participation. Therefore I made the decision to move forward using snowball sampling by connecting with personal LGB contacts. Snowball sampling is a widely used method for recruiting participants for qualitative research studies that are not always socially visible (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Some researchers also believe snowball sampling allows for studying participants in natural interactions (Coleman 1958; Becker 1996).

When it comes to conducting qualitative research, scholars have engaged in great discourse over if there is a magic number that is needed to gather significant data (Sandelowski 1995; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007; Crestwell 2007; Thomas and Pollio 2002; McLaughlin 2004; Baker and Edwards 2012; Braun and Clarke 2013). Sandelowski (1995) recommends researchers gather samples that are small enough to manage, but are large enough to add understanding of the experience being studied and contributes to the literature. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) posits when locating a socially invisible target population, gathering a representative sample of the larger population is ideal. While I was able to start with a few individuals in the LGB community, continuing the referral chain proved problematic as respondents were not sure of others like them with the same experience. Often times LGB individuals move through society with an invisible identity, leaving most people not realizing how many homosexual individuals they truly know (Ochs 2007). When using the snowball sampling method did not yield the sample size I had hoped to achieve, I discovered how difficult it was to gather qualitative data from this very specific population for many multi-layered reasons. As a result, I reached beyond current lesbians, gays, and bisexuals that I knew personally and sent out blind invitations to LGBTQ+ organizations and individuals that were active on social media (such as Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, and Instagram).

For this study, locating lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals that attend or attended the Black Church proved to be a difficult task. My original goal for this study was to interview 20 individuals and I connected with 18 potential participants. Due to individual interest I ended up with 14 participants for this research study. Research participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (2) attend or attended a church that falls within the Black Church denominations, (3) be 18 years of age or older, and (4) speak English. Because

there are many African American churches that are not under the Black Church umbrella, it was important to verify research participants' church denominations before moving forward with the interview. In order to obtain a relatively decent participant sample size, I did not restrict or limit research participation to a confined geographical location; this allowed me to conduct interviews beyond just the Central Florida area gaining a richer perspective of the Black Church experience for LGBs. Once I made contact with a participant, I emailed them the consent form to review and scheduled either a face-to-face (if local) or phone interview at an agreed upon time and location.

### **Data Collection**

Conducting interviews is the most widely used naturalistic method and was used for this study. Individual face-to-face or phone, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with participants being asked some demographic questions prior to the interview. Interviews lasted 40 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with the participant permission and were facilitated by me. When participants showed interest in participating, I provided each with the IRB Informed Consent document to review and informed participants to ask any questions of me about the research study. Once participants were ready to move forward with scheduling an interview, I provided a variety of times throughout the week and weekend. Most participant interviews were conducted after 5:00 p.m. during the week and two participants were interviewed on a Saturday morning.

Interviews were audio recorded using a micro-recorder and were later downloaded onto my computer and backed up on an external hard drive. Audio recording the interviews allowed me the opportunity to focus on the stories as told by the participant versus trying to capture

everything by hand. The audio recordings also allowed me to transcribe the data at a later date, capturing verbatim words and quotes that I used throughout the results section to tell of their experience in the Black Church. Although I did not confine participants to a geographical location and offered those located outside of the Central Florida area the option to conduct their interview via Skype no participant was interested in the option. There was even one participant that explained she was okay being audio recorded, but not video recorded. Face-to-face interviews did offer an added benefit of being able to gauge a person's nonverbal communication, providing cues on the person's level of comfort when asked/answering a question. As a result of noticing this among face-to-face interview participants, I made sure to notice during a phone interview when participants paused or stated 'that's a good question.' This was an indication to continue to explore the participants experience around that question.

To ensure confidentiality of participants I created a pseudonym for each one. Each interview began with a few demographic questions, moved to a few general questions about attending the Black Church, and then I began to ask specific questions about their experience. "The wording of questions shapes how participants respond to them" (Bowleg 2008: 314). Therefore it was important for me to develop interview questions that did not treat the participants' identity as separate pieces (e.g., Black Church member + gender + sexual orientation) because doing so could become a challenge when shaping my analysis. It was my ultimate goal to engage in a conversation about the participants' full experience in the Black Church. See interview guide (Appendix B).

## Data Analysis

I transcribed the digital recordings verbatim. Since I was transcribing the interviews, it was important to complete each interview transcription within two to three days of an interview so that I did not get behind on the transcription process and become overwhelmed. While most interviews are transcribed by professionals, I chose to do it myself to become familiar with my data and to start recognizing themes and patterns among participants stories. Once all of the interviews were transcribed, the next step was to begin analyzing the collected data. Instead of beginning this research project with preconceived notions, I wanted to use an inductive analysis to allow themes and patterns to emerge from the data gathered.

Throughout the data analysis process I took into consideration Bowleg's (2008: 312) cautions and suggestions on the "methodological challenges of qualitative intersectionality research." She posits, "qualitative analysts face overlapping concerns" with making appropriate and significant assumptions free of personal, cultural, and social bias (Bowleg 2008: 317). According to Bowleg (2008), during the analysis process it is critical to understand the implicit nature of intersectionality and to look at the data considering the broader sociocultural context of the individuals' perspective. When conducting research through an intersectionality framework, interpretation becomes essential to the researcher; to not present results that do not consider participants' social identities, sexual orientation, and social position within an institutional structure as independent (Bowleg 2008).

During the data analysis process I used thematic analysis, which is one of the common methods used to examine and pinpoint patterns/themes that arise from conducting qualitative research in the social sciences (Guest 2012). According to Aronson (1994) thematic analysis, centers on identifying themes and patterns of lived experiences and/or behavior. Thematic

analysis allows the researcher to determine what has become a pattern or common responses related to the research question(s) that informs a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first step in thematic analysis is to identify main patterns and themes of experiences based on recurring words, phrases, and stories from interviews. After identifying main patterns the researcher then begins to expound upon the patterns, classifying related patterns into sub-themes (Aronson 1994). Using thematic analysis should also allow for a comprehensive collective experience to emerge from individual stories.

Deciding to use thematic analysis was also the best data analysis method for this research project because: (1) I was seeking to understand how one's stigmatized and intersecting identities impact their experience with the Black Church, and (2) allowed an opportunity to expand the data beyond individual interviews and look for what patterns emerged across interviews to gather a comprehensive collective experience of among the sample population. After reading through interview transcripts I identified four consistent patterns/themes and used these as my first level of coding. Patterns that were consistent among participants were: (1) growing up in the Black Church, (2) struggles with identity integration-intersectionality, (3) stigma from/within the Black Church, and (4) breaking away from the Black Church. Additionally, there was one theme (Evangelism) that emerged among two participants I found significant that was also included. I also noted sub-themes that were significant and consistent across participant interviews. This breakdown is provided in Appendix C. As I viewed the patterns/themes that emerged across the responses from the various questions, I began to determine how best to organize the data to present my results.

## **Sample**

Thirteen of the fourteen individuals that participated in this research study identified as African American, 1 identified as Caribbean, and the participant sample ages ranged from 19 to 44, the median age was 28. Participants' sexual identity included the following: one female lesbian, nine gay males, two bisexual males, and two identified as queer not labeling themselves with a particular sexual lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. Although queer was not a sexual identity category presented as an option, when asked two participants replied queer therefore this information was noted as significant. Ochs (2007) identifies that some LGB individuals do not want to be defined or labeled as such and choose to identify as non-binary as to not confine themselves. Participants attended various Black Church denominations which included Baptist (Primitive, Full Gospel, and Southern), AME and AME Zion. Among the participant group, geographic location also emerged as significant. All but two of the participants were not living in the same city they grew up in and all but two were not living close to family. Twelve of the fourteen participants no longer lived in the state they grew up in. Participants were located in North Carolina, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Texas, Washington, DC, California, and Florida. While I was not interested in capturing education and employment, all participants held at least a Bachelor's degree (5 participants held a Master's degree, 1 was enrolled in a Master's program, and 3 were working on a terminal degree), and all but one was employed full-time (the one was a full-time graduate student).

## **Growing Up In The Black Church**

For decades research scholars have acknowledged African Americans in the U.S. as one of the most religious ethnic groups, due to three religiosity factors: regular church attendance,



participation in daily prayers, and identifying the importance of faith in everyday life (Quinn et al. 2016; Coleman, Lindley, Annang, Saunders, and Gaddist 2012; Ellison and Gay 1990; Taylor et al. 1987). Despite a Pew Research Report (2009) showing a generational decline in church attendance overall for the Black Church attendance among generations has held slightly steadier than other religious institutions. According to Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:311) “African American families and the Black Church are involved in a dynamic interactive relationship. Families were the building blocks in creating the early Black Church and established a connection that glued the community to each other. ” This is due in part to most individuals begin attending the Black Church as babies. They are raised in the church environment; often times with other family members, neighbors, and community members watching them grow up.

For this research study it was important to determine when participants began their relationship with the Black Church. Therefore at the beginning of each interview I asked the question ‘when did you start attending the Black Church?’ All 13 of the 14 participants stated they began attending church as a child, with many responding their church attendance preceded their birth. Participants stated they were born, raised, and subsequently grew up in the Black Church, often attending with older and/or younger siblings. Allen, a gay male in his forties, discussed how he grew up in the church and going was a family thing. Many also acknowledged their mother and/or father being an active member in the church, holding various leadership roles. Mitchell, a 30-year-old gay male recalls:

My father was an Elder and my mom was very into church. She was a Sunday school teacher, youth advisor, and both of them were in the choir.

Michael, a 23-year-old bisexual male answers:

My mom and dad were both involved in church. My dad was in the choir, I remember going to practice with him running around in the choir stand. And mom was an alter worker, you know the people that are there catching or covering folks when they fall out at the altar.

Additionally, thirteen out of fourteen participants also acknowledged they grew up in a religious household (religious household was defined as attending church at least twice a month). When asked Candice, a 28-year-old self-identified queer female if she grew up in a religious household she responded “absolutely a 110%! My mom was a Sunday school teacher and my dad was on the Deacon board. Including Sunday church, we were at church three to four times a week for different events.” Kevin, a 26-year-old gay male recalled:

Most definitely, we were at church at least three times a week for bible study, rehearsal for something, and Sunday school/Church service.

Nicole, a 38-year-old self-identified homosexual female puts it:

That’s a trick question, I wouldn’t say they [parents] were religious as far as consistent church attendance, but I would say it was a lot of “praise the Lord” and all that religious stuff [in the house].

While one participant did not grow up in a religious household he stated that there were religious symbols in his home such as pictures of Jesus and the last supper.

African American youth are more likely to attend church services and participate regularly in other church related activities, compared to other religious youth groups (Smith, Denton, Faris, and Regnerus 2002; Wilson, Rodrigue, and Taylor 1997). During interviews many participants recalled their involvement in church related activities during their adolescent and teenage years. David, a 25-year-old gay male talked in his interview about serving on the usher board, being a member of the youth choir, and having roles in

the church Easter and Christmas productions. Other participants shared of being involved in youth mission trips, camps, retreats, conferences, and the youth music ministry.

### **Summary**

After slavery the Black Church was the stabilizing institution that provided identity and worth to the African American community (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). The Black Church also has a long history of providing support for families and intentional socialization opportunities for youth. As reported by Taylor et al. (1987) many individuals find the Black Church to be a source of unity, strength, and provide moral guidelines concerning behavior and conduct. Which has served as the main reason why parents want to raise their children in the Black Church.

Collective worship services and other group interactions/activities (e.g prayer meetings, bible studies, etc.) offer members opportunity to develop spiritually and personally (Henderson 2016; Ellison 1993). Because many African American parents themselves grew up in the church they feel compelled to raise their children properly (based on informal African American culture) and give them the same spiritual foundation they grew up in (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Often times in the Black Church, children are not given the option of not attending church and are required to participate in church youth activities (Quinn et al. 2016). In a society where African Americans must deal with many stressors of life, being involved in the Black Church provides a sense of contribution to making the overall community a better place.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

*Matthew 7:1-2*

According to Marrow (2003) religion is one of the most powerful and influential institutions in America, contributing significantly to the moral constructs that impact individuals and socially construct society. Preston Williams (1969:254) posits the Black Church is designed to “help one find meaning in life, establish personhood, raise black consciousness, and find a foundation upon which to place their beliefs.” The Black Church has remained significant to and in the African American community because it has always been seen as more than a religious institution. It’s more than a place of worship and prayer, it’s woven into the social fabric of the community; it’s a place of fellowship, cultural bonding, and community support (Jeffries et al. 2008). Krause (2002) acknowledges religious communities often organically produce an environment that cultivates friendships and encourages social and informational support of one another. Because of this, it makes separating religion, the church, and community from other aspects of life difficult.

It is a fact; the Black Church considers homosexual behavior as divisive and immoral. As a result sexual minorities often experience stigma in the predominately heterosexual Black Church environment (Henderson 2016; Schuck and Liddle 2001; Taylor and Chatters 1998; Mahaffy 1996; Ellison 1991). In some church congregations the harshness of homonegative messages directly flow from the pulpit (Foster et al. 2011) and in other churches the disapproval of homosexuality comes in the form of microaggressions from the church pastor, other leaders, and congregation (Quinn et al. 2016). Microaggressions are slights or insults on one’s identity

that can be intentional or unintentional and are verbal or nonverbal assaults (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin 2007). The previously mentioned examples were common experiences among participants.

### **Homonegative Messages**

The pastor is the most prominent figure and his sermons are the centerpiece of the Black Church experience. Pastors maintain a level of institutional power within the Black Church that provides important influence in the lives of their congregants and the surrounding community. As Nicole Tinson (2013:1) posits “pastors serve as elected spiritual representatives.” The authoritative role of the pastor coupled with their biblical knowledge creates and enforces a power dynamic within the Black Church. The pastor uses biblical terms supported by scripture to describe the manner in which African Americans should strive to live (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Because of this every word, every action, and in action the pastor makes has a profound effect on the church’s membership and their spiritual and personal development.

When asked, “what has or was your experience like at your church and what was your church’s’ stance on homosexuality” all but five of the fourteen participants respond by sharing negative experiences. Michael shared in his church the pastor preached about living a good life and accused homosexuals of being adulterers and announced that they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven because of their sinful behavior. Amanda, a 25-year-old who identifies as queer shares of their experience: “The pastor would sneak in random messages about homosexuality for sermons that had nothing to do with the topic.” While David responded he never heard his pastor mention anything about homosexuality in any of his sermons or in passing conversations, but he did admit to it being “just one of those elephants in the room that we talked

around, but did not actually address it.” Candice acknowledged the messages she would hear in church were the more common ones:

Homosexuality is a sin, you’re damned to hell, and it [homosexuality] is presented as if it is a choice. Some of those messages provide a false sense of unreal security that you can somehow change your sexual attraction. I’ll speak for myself, when I got to the place where I realized that it was something that wasn’t going away I think for me and those that thought like me it kind of sends you into like a depression hearing those messages.

Matthew, a 20-year-old gay male shares of his experience attending the Black Church:

I recall prior to attending service I took time to think about how I would present myself because I had just come out to myself. [Because this was a new church for me] I made sure my clothes were not too tight because as a gay man you are looked at a certain way, so I was very meticulous about the way I looked. When I got to church the pastor was delivering a very misogynistic message saying things about women and servitude. Then I feel when the pastor saw me he changed his message to the ‘gay issue.’ In my mind I thought what did I do wrong? I should not be clock-able because I am wearing this nice button down shirt and my pants are not tight, I’m not talking to anyone. He made the whole rest of the sermon about gay bashing and gays should be condemned to hell, he clearly did not like the gays.

That’s when Matthew remarks he realized being gay is something that you don’t necessarily wear. “It’s not something you can put on and take off, it is something that is all over you and people sense it- the pastor sensed it.” Keith, a 23-year-old gay male shared how the homophobic church environment denied him the opportunity to serve as a youth leader; because he shared he was gay with youth group leaders. Despite not being able to serve in a leadership role, Keith continued to attend youth service night and still attended church services for several years.

Religious groups in the United States vary on their views concerning homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009), which includes congregations within the Black Church. Researchers have acknowledged factors such as clergy influence, church demographics, geography, political,

and local culture influences impact how local congregations respond on controversial issues (Ellingson et al. 2001, Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008). While the Black Church is taking a hard stance against homosexuality, local congregations do not always adhere to the same stance or reflect the same attitudes as the governing institution (Cadge et al. 2007). Allen shared at his Baptist church he did not experience any anti-homosexual messages growing up:

In my home church no one never really spoke to the issue of homosexuality directly; I never heard any sermon or direct teaching about this. My home pastor was one that embraced and loved everyone that came through the doors of the church and those he encountered in the community. I was aware in other churches there were homonegative messages, but that was not my experience in my church.

Mitchell, Reggie, and Robert echoed the same message as Allen, but did recall when a guest pastor came to their home church they did not always refrain from delivering homonegative messages.

From the pulpit pastors have a tendency to elevate the sin of homosexuality above all other sins, making it more distinct and severe. Homonegative messages contribute to the maintenance of the stigma around homosexuality in the African American community. Because pastors are highly respected in the Black Church as the chief administrator and a messenger of God, their words highly influence the identity development among members (Quinn and Dickson-Gomez 2016).

### **Christian Identity vs Sexual Identity**

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals that have homonegative experiences in the Black Church feel they must choose between accepting or rejecting their religious identity or accepting,

rejecting, or suppressing their sexual identity. Because of the homonegative stigma sexual minorities endure in the Black Church they come to experience their sexual identity is in conflict with their religious identity (Quinn et al. 2016). Not only do homosexuals experience this conflict, but they truly believe their religious and sexual identities are not interlocking (at least while in the Black Church) and they must choose one identity over the other not recognizing the intersectionality of who they are. This mind set was very common among participants while they were attending the Black Church.

The impact the Black Church has on sexual minority identity development is significant as shared by the participants in this study. Their experiences support previous research studies revealing the stigma that exists in the Black Church around matters of homosexuality (Barnes 2013; Adler 2012; Chaney and Patrick 2010; Bowleg 2008). When asked ‘what impact did the Black Church have on your own identity development as an LGB person?’ Thirteen out of fourteen participants shared how the messages and people within the Black Church severely impacted their sexual identity development. Participants often remarked of when they realized something was ‘different’ or not ‘normal’ about themselves, they did not want to accept it for various reasons.

David discussed in his interview realizing around the age of 7 or 8 that he was gay. He admits he did not want to be gay, only because of the things he heard from other church members about those “types” of experiences. He goes on to state “it made me not want to identify as gay at all, because I enjoyed church and I never wanted to be ostracized by the one community I felt the most involved in. I didn’t really feel like I belonged to the homosexual or gay community, I felt I belonged to the church community. So I didn’t want to accept one thing and then possibly be rejected from the other.” As the interviews continued Jeff, a 25-year-old



gay male shared when he began to feel things [sexually] that were not as they should be according to the heterosexual messages he was taught at church:

I saw kids that were gay and when those kids came out publically, the church and its members shamed their families. Everyone around them were treated differently, their mothers and sisters were treated like pariahs. And I did not want to bring that unnecessary stress to my family or cause problems, because I saw how many other problems were created for their families. And so I felt like if my sexual orientation would cause that much friction for my family I did not want to be out at that time, especially at that age. God gave me a vision not to come out because I knew that would cause so much unnecessary judgment in church with our family and social network. When other kids did come out as gay, parents would not let their kids be exposed to that kid for fear that their child would become gay. I mean I even saw how my own mother treated gay people, so I kept things private during my teen years.

In the Black Church, the *Bible* is the authority for living life, it's just part of the culture and you either align with it or get out. Nicole shares in her experience that you have to believe what you are told in the Black Church there is no room for questioning the *Bible* or church authority. She responds:

I always felt there was something different about me when I was younger, but I never really knew what I was until I got older and started going back to church and that's when it was very uncomfortable. You start to feel people looking at you. You start to see how people would talk to the gay men in church and you could see how they would talk down to them and you see their eyes rolling. I didn't see anyone else in the church that was female and gay that dressed the way I dressed outside of church. It was definitely an interesting situation that was not fun and finally I just decided not to subject myself to that anymore. Because you don't feel comfortable in that environment, you can't be different in the Black Church.

For Reggie a 35-year-old gay male who first started attending the Black Church while in high school because his friends would always talk about the fun they had in church. He discussed while attending church he dated a girl (who now identifies as a lesbian) and together they would put on a united front that they were the perfect young heterosexual couple who were Christians

and were living the life they were told to live by the Black Church. He acknowledges that the Black Church culture pushed him further into the closet. When asked to explain his comment further he responded:

I did not feel comfortable talking anything that was not the status quo when it came to sexuality, so when people would ask questions of me and my girlfriend at the time like when are y'all getting married or having kids, I remember feeling compelled to respond to those questions in the most acceptable heteronormative way- Yes we are going to get married, we are going to have kids. But in the back of my mind I'm thinking this is not what I want to do, but this is what I had to do. In some degree it was like I was responding to pressure to perform straight and that performing made feel like this is what you had to when you are in the Black Church. People have to think and believe that you are straight because otherwise you will not be accepted in this place.

Scholars have identified being raised in a homonegative environment contributes to feelings of internalized homophobia, isolation, remaining closeted, and having secret same-sex relationships (Valera and Taylor 201; Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000). Kevin shares that at a young age he could not put language to what he was feeling around his sexual identity, but whenever he would bring it up [his sexual confusion] to his mother, she would essentially try to pray it away. "There was no room to deal with these feelings, so I just pushed them away and prayed for God to take them away for 10 years or so. I would also ask my mother for help to deal with this and she would also send up prayers for it to go away or acted as if it did not exist." Kevin also discussed how being in the Black Church delayed his coming out; because to him it was the worst thing he could fathom doing as far as sin goes. In a soft, low voice Kevin says, "I felt if I came out it would be the end of relationships that I cared very deeply about." Another participant described hearing [in his home] gayness being described as a disease rather than a lifestyle. Michael shared he felt nervous, perverted, demonic, and undercover, which lead to him

hating himself because the pastor said according to the word of God if you are a homosexual you should hate everything about yourself.

In the African American community, there is an expectation for females to project a feminine gender-role and for males to project a masculine gender-role (Quinn and Dickson-Gomez 2016; Brown 2005). The Black Church often contributes to the institutionalized ideology of heterosexuality in the African American community that is promoted in opposition to homosexuality. Amanda shares the impact the Black Church had on their sexual identity this way:

I was always masculine as a child, people [in the church] were forcing femininity on me, because I had an older sister that was gay, so I guess you can say they didn't want me to turn out the same way. So they wanted me to dress, act, and present a certain way to not be considered "gay." Although I started having secret romantic relationships with other girls, I was still telling myself I was straight. It was interesting because I was hugging and kissing on girls but all the while saying I was straight (laughing). During this time I was very fragile, sensitive, insecure, and not a lot of confidence because when I tried to be my true self, when I did things naturally, I was under scrutiny from my parents.

Jerry a 25-year-old bisexual male described he started internalizing the homophobic messages he would hear. Listening to the pastor and other church members use jokes to mask their thinly veiled homophobia of the LGBTQ+ community was scary for him. He began to believe that he needed to be straight for complete salvation and to be truly loved by his parents. He acknowledges he did everything he could to fit in which included being part of a Christian rap group and other things that would connect him to the church. Jerry shares:

As I was considering colleges I wanted to attend seminary, because I needed to understand my sexuality to fix the issue. Once I determined there was no money in a seminary degree, I moved on to wanting to learn about computers. During this time I also joined ROTC because I thought it would be a way to fix myself from not being gay. It was one of the most masculine things I could do.

Jerry explained that he wanted to be like his dad and brother who were both athletic and very masculine. When the roles of masculinity and femininity is reinforced through scriptures it makes it difficult for LGB individuals to come out; for fear of losing their connection to the Black Church and being a Christian. As such, many participants camouflaged their sexual identity by adapting behaviors, appearances, activities, etc. to fall in line with the social constructs of femininity and masculinity.

### **Summary**

The Black Church congregation should provide an environment of belonging and value, but participants often felt alone and judged as they struggled with their developing sexual identity. Individuals that are in the process of defining their sexuality often place their religious values above their sexual identity (Fukuyama, Puig, Wolf, and Baggs 2014). For LGBs in the Black Church this holds true as described by the participants in this study, the thought of accepting their intersecting religious and sexual identities was a threat to them being a member of the Black Church. For African Americans religious participation can be a source of strength and serve as a sanctuary against racism, but for sexual minorities it threatens their sense of group identity and community. According to feminist scholars an individual's social location has the greatest impact on whether or not they publically present all of their intersecting identities (McCall 2005; Collins 1990; 2000; Crenshaw 1994). Collins (1993:560) argues an "individual may determine an identity has salience over another identity for a given time and place." All participants concealed their sexual identity while attending the Black Church as a way of protecting themselves against judgment and discrimination.

Theology-driven and scripture supported messages from the Black Church have a profound effect on how an LGB individual comes to understand, accept, and present their sexual identity. The stigma concerning homosexuality led many to believe that the Black Church was not accessible to them as long as they identified as a sexual minority. The decision to come out for participants was heavily influenced by pastoral messages, attitudes/beliefs from parents, and interactions with other church members.

## CHAPTER SIX: CHURCH EVANGELISM

*Therefore go out and make disciples for all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely I am with you always, to the very end of age.*

*Matthew 28:19-20*

Within the Black Church the word Evangelism evokes a range of images from street corner preachers to peddlers going door to door or one might visualize tent and arena revivals. James O. Stalling (1988) writes in *Telling the Story: Evangelism in the Black Church* the tradition of Evangelism cannot be denied in the Black Church, proclaiming God's saving grace and mercy to bring men and women into community with other Christians is a fundamental mission of black religion. Evangelism has been defined as sacrificial service a person enters in to, preaching the gospel [the literal word of God] to believers and non-believers about the good news of God (Cecil 2003). Evangelism involves communicating the gospel in this manner: delivering a warning about sin, offering an explanation of God's remedy for sin, and giving a call to repent sins (Cecil 2003). With the end result being individuals turning from their sins and turning towards following God.

Evangelism is often considered an important ministry in the faith community and those that participate in this ministry are considered "called to do this work." Being called to evangelize to others does not require a formal theology education; an Evangelist typically receives training from a church Elder, Pastor, or now a days an online evangelism training program. The Black Church trains Evangelists from the religious, social, cultural, and political positions it occupies. Paulette Thompson-Clinton (2012) argues evangelism training should be comprehensive to provide effective techniques to connect the word of God with the human story.

Two participants in this research study identified they served as an Evangelist while attending the Black Church. During this experience both asserted they were dealing with suppressing their own gay and queer sexual identity. This experience for Kevin and Candice proved to be significant for them, as they were specifically trained (by their church leaders) to preach homonegative messages condemning all sexual minorities in the Black Church. Kevin shares of his time as an Evangelist:

When I was evangelizing I found myself sharing the same homophobic messages that I had heard from my pastor's pulpit- homosexuals were sick and needed God to redeem them and save them. During alter calls for prayer, it was always inevitable I would have someone come up to me that was part of what I would call "the committee" those who were part of the LGBTQ+ community. I would tell these individuals the things I had been told- you need deliverance, you need God to take this away. It came a point I just could not do it anymore. When people would come into the prayer line I would just hug them because I could not bring myself to say you need deliverance or help them to pray it away anymore. I would just hug them and cry because it was my way of saying I can't openly accept you, but that I do understand and that I am with you. It was a weird shift that something was changing in me, but there was no one close to me that I could relate to or share my own issues with.

Kevin went on to share he was in a place where he was starting to accept himself more and could not continue to perpetuate same the homophobic messages of hate and fear he had heard all of his life towards his own community. Once he accepted his gay identity, Kevin left the Black Church. He now feels he has the freedom to think and has been able to study scripture through a different lens. He no longer fears he is going to hell or that God will not accept him for who he is "...my thought is God not only loves me but He accepts me."

Candice, who served as a Youth Minister from age 12-19 described her experience in this role going from church to church speaking to other youth:

I delivered the same homophobic messages that were preached to me because that's what I was taught to do, that's how I was trained. I was guided a certain

way and the message came out a certain way based on the messages that you are taught. At the time I believed spirituality and closeness with God was about sacrifice, sacrificing your own happiness. And so the pleasures of being happy, the pleasures of being yourself, I was taught was the ego. And to be able to be yourself, to have freedom in that kind of capacity was considered sin. Because it felt right it was viewed as wrong. So using that belief system it was easy for me to spew those types of homophobic messages because I was speaking to others that were like me, but I was speaking to myself as well. Through all of this time I was praying that I would snap out of it [feeling same-sex attraction], but it just didn't happen.

When asked a follow-up question about reconciling delivering homophobic messages to others? Kevin and Candice both shared it took them years of self-healing and learning to live in the present. Candice shares of her self-healing journey “even though I'm okay with my queerness now there's still years of pain for me, there's certain pain that you are not allowed to express out loud.”

### **Summary**

Chaney (2008:7) posits, “the purpose of the church is to advance throughout the community at large.” With the driving purpose of bringing more people into relationship with God, Evangelism has become the medium in which the Black Church seeks to reach a broader audience. By providing diverse experiences and opportunities to engage in learning about religion and faith, Evangelists are able to meet individuals where they are. The narratives of Kevin and Candice demonstrate that being devoted to ministry also means being devoted to sharing the overall message from the church, regardless if it was in contradiction with one's sexual identity. Like other LGBs that operate in ministry, they could struggle with their sexual identity in silence because they knew that no one connected to them would understand. Once



Kevin and Candice started to accept their sexual identities they knew they could no longer continue to perpetuate messages of hate, fear, and reject to their own community.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: I'S FREE NOW

*Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man*

*Luke 6:22*

Going off to college is often a critical time of personal development and self-exploration on many levels. Life between the ages of 18-25 has been classified as emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000). Barry and Nelson (2005:115) posits it's during this emerging adulthood, young people "question the religious beliefs they were raised with, place greater emphasis on individual spirituality than religious institution affiliation, and pick and choose the aspects of religion that suit them best." Once away from the Black Church, their family, and community study participants felt the freedom to explore their sexual identity and start learning and studying for themselves about the religious doctrines and traditions that influenced their lives for so many years. All of the participants remarked about how the time away from home was truly significant for them, some finally accepted their sexual identity and others experienced a range of reactions.

When discussing his college years, David proclaimed at age 18 he broke from the Black Church and did not go back until age 22. He acknowledged accepting his sexual identity during this time, and how that acceptance came with a freedom of being away from not only the church, but just being by himself and having to figure out life on his own. "I had the opportunity to get to know God for myself and not just through the vessel of the church. I was able to have my own relationship with God." Mitchel shared similar thoughts about his college experience:

I took a break from church when I went off to college. Because growing up not going to church was not an option, but when I went to college I played by my own rules. I lived in the residence halls, I had a car, and could make my own decisions. I did not have to go to church. I was going to the gay club and for the first few years of college that is where I was able to be around other gay people. I went to college in 2004 at an HBCU and there were no services on campus for a gay student, no conversations, no safe spaces, it was very closeted. I could not talk to my family about my sexual identity, so the club was my safe haven. I went there every weekend and church took a back burner.

For LGB individuals, breaking free from the religious institution that they have always known can also create some distress during this crucial period of identity development. This was true for Amanda; they spoke in their interview of how going off to college allowed them to break from the family church. They recall not having to deal with an overbearing church or parents telling them they were going to hell [because of their sexual identity]. They knew once they left home they did not want to go to another church, and there was no way they were going to join a church. After the initial phase of being away from their parents and the church Amanda shares “I was suicidal and contemplated running out into traffic. I lost weight, about 20 pounds because I forgot to eat. Thankfully I did find some supportive friends.” Amanda added that for their own sanity they had to remove themselves from all things religious. They went on to say, “right now I have a hard time even walking into church.”

Diversity in the religious experience varies within the Black Church institution. As mentioned earlier Allen did not attend a church that created a homonegative environment and because of that he explains it made it easier on him, because he had no confusion or negative self-views or thoughts. Allen described his college years as a journey of maturation, where he was trying to make sense of what he was feeling.

The journey for me was a natural progression, of making sense of wanting a connection with another person. Recognizing there was some attraction towards

my male friends, but not really understanding what that was and naming it. I think the maturation process was great for me, because I think for many people they hear these negative messages and they have to decide early on their determination to live authentic or closeted. I had more liberty to figure it out who I am without some sense of rejection that could happen.

### **Religious vs. Spiritual**

It is during the emerging adulthood years individuals also become more critical of religious institutions and begin to value more individual spiritual experiences (Barry and Nelson 2005). Greater emphasis is placed on thinking critically spiritually than accepting religious doctrine without questions. Arnett and Jenson (2002) argue individuals [during the emerging adulthood years] use religion as a symbolic toolbox, selecting the beliefs, traditions, and practices they want to believe and support. The college journey also provides a conducive environment for individuals to learn about other religions and cultures. It's these opportunities and experiences where LGB individuals begin to shake the stigmatized environment of the Black Church and fully accept their intersectional identities.

When asked the question is religion important to you, some participants shared with ease how they now consider themselves spiritual; others shared the complexity of having a religious or spiritual identity. The statements that were shared around this question were some of the most powerful during the interview process. Nicole describes that she does not believe in religion anymore because of society. She goes on to explain, “[religion] has become either political or more hypocritically widespread. That’s why I define myself as spiritual, I know there is a higher power and there is something bigger out there than all of us.” Kevin recalls that religion is not for him. He admits it used to play a more important role and he never imagined he would feel

the way he currently does- but the abuse and sense of rejection that he experienced in the church has tainted his relationship with religion.

Associating with a religion means adhering to traditions, institutionalized beliefs, and rules that are often in contradiction with being a sexual minority. Yet individuals who grow up in the Black Church are not just associated with the church on Sunday's, but their entire life revolves around the church in some manner, which makes the transition from religious to spiritual complex. David's answer to this question provides a glimpse into the complexity of identifying as religious or spiritual, he shares:

So I go back and forth with this because like I say I grew up so heavily involved in church. Church and religion was very important at one point in my life. So to say with the things that I have gone through to say that I don't see religion as important I don't think it would be true reflection of my beliefs. I think I'm still building those beliefs, but now I would say that I am more spiritual. I'm on the fence about claiming a particular religion because I'm not an avid churchgoer. And most of my hesitation of saying I'm a Christian is because based off of my understanding and what I grew up learning in church. In order to be a Christian you have to abide by the bible and also according to my understanding of the bible a man who lays with another man is seen as an abomination. So I don't identify as Christian because I don't think religion is one of those things you can take some parts out and then say you keep others. That's what makes me hesitant, I feel like if I can't accept it in its wholeness I should not accept it at all. In order for me to identify as a Christian I would need to be part of that institution [the Black Church] and I would need to accept those bible stories that I do not accept.

Robert, a 29 year-old gay male identifies as religious and spiritual. He offers this explanation about is religion important "some people answer that question very easily am I religious yes, but religion is a lot of traditions. Am I spiritual yes but all of my life is not is holding tight to religion. I do believe that God died for my sins, so I'm like half spiritual and half religious." He believes the Bible is a collection of stories used as a reference to assist individuals in life. "Because the Black Church is quick to reference

scriptures to make a point and it is important to recognize there is a story behind every scripture which is not always explained. It is important for me to know scriptures for myself. ” Despite the homonegative messages he hears in his church Michael still finds religion to be important to him and shared this:

Religion is still very important to me. It actually was a big issue for me and that’s why it took me so long to come out because did I have to choose between being religious or my sexual identity. I’m still kind of working through some stuff, trying to find meaning and understanding of the bible for myself. When you grow up in the Black Church it is different. It would be kind of weird not having it [religion] in my life, but I don’t attend church as often and I’m not in it as deep.

Amanda shares experiencing ‘spiritual trauma’ from the Black Church is the sole reason they do not find religion to be important. They added their entire family’s life has revolved around the church, their parents’ friendships, community connections, and memories. They identify as spiritual, does not believe in Jesus, but still prays and listens to gospel music. Like Amanda, Jeff acknowledges that he is more invested in being spiritual and believes there is a creator, but does not commit to worshipping that being. He further stated, “looking at the history of different religions those books [Quran, Tora, Bible, etc.] have gone through so many revisions and evolutions there is no way we hear the correct interpretations. That’s why I don’t think you have to go to church every Sunday to celebrate a spiritual being.” Reggie also shared religion was not important to him because he has accepted things about the world that he will probably never know. He does not need a book or theology to follow that tells him what to do, he does not need a place of faith to attend to remind him what to do every day. He sums up his assertion this way:

I do think that God is a very real concept, I don’t necessarily believe God is a person in human form at all. I guess agnostic is more of the box I would put myself in and being in that box makes it more comfortable for me to be gay and still talk about God and talk about love. I can situate myself in conversations and feel comfortable being exactly who I am.

### **Summary**

For LGBs the journey towards accepting their sexual identity forced them to question the teachings from the Black Church. Among participants there was not one consistent definition conveyed to define what it means to be spiritual, but rejecting their religious identity was very important to their personal development. The Association for Spirituality, Ethics, Religion, and Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) defined spirituality as a “capacity that moves an individual towards meaning, peace, knowledge, understanding, hope, connectedness, growth, compassion, and wholeness that is personal and unique to all persons” (1995:30). It is important to recognize that one’s definition of identifying as spiritual is subjective to one’s experiences, culture, and social location. Tan (2008:135) posits “since religion is a conduit for expressing spirituality and most mainstream religions do not condone any form of homosexuality, one would expect that LGBs would have nothing to do with spirituality.” Identifying as spiritual allowed participants to determine exactly their definition of spirituality, unlike not having the choice to define what it means to be religious.

### **Breaking Free From The Black Church**

While leaving the Black Church serves as an effective mechanism for dealing with religious-based homonegativity and abuse it can come at a significant cost for sexual minorities. Many participants interviewed shared since leaving the Black Church they do not have a church to call home, are not being willing to consider attending an affirming congregation, and some have even been disconnected from family members. Kevin shares his experience with the Black

Church was bittersweet. He was exposed to African American leaders in his community, respectable people that you did not see anywhere else that provided stable role model reinforcement. However Kevin added, “I am not sure I can ever return to the Black Church again with the same frequency. Because when I consider how the Black Church has abused the LGBTQ+ community, marginalized my community I cannot in good conscious sit in a place where I know I am not genuinely accepted- tolerated but not accepted. I have been damaged, if I ever get involved in ministry again it will strictly be outside of the Black Church.” Nicole shares that she is at an age where she wants to get to know her dad’s side of the family. She has aunts, cousins, and a half-sister that she has lost touch with. But for her identifying as a lesbian, it scares her to reach out to them because they are so into the Black Church and are so religious. She fears that she will be rejected before having an opportunity to connect with her family.

Amanda was open to sharing since coming out they have lost close relationships with their parents and childhood church family members. They speak of having to unfriend women they grew up knowing as ‘second mothers’ from their Facebook page because they would share posts related to Amanda’s sexual identity and work with the LGBTQ+ community with their parents causing drama. They added, “my parents don’t want to hear about my job working with LGBTQ+ youth, or my life raising a child, or me being married to a woman.” Matthew described after his last experience attending a new Black Church that he would not step foot into another church again.

I decided I would create my own relationship with God; I did not need the BS anymore. As LGBT people in the African American community we are a subgroup within a subgroup, there is absolutely no reason why I should not be able to go to my own community, my own church, and feel like I don’t belong there and feel unloved in place that is supposed to be where everybody can come and get their Jesus fix. I’m not supposed to go to church and feel like less than a person and the



weight my sexuality is on my shoulders. I should leave church feeling like I can conquer the world because God's got my back.

Despite not agreeing with how the Black Church demeans the LGBTQ+ community, Mitchell shares it's hard to just let go of something that he has known since before he can remember. He still attends the Black Church, but he is not as active as he once was in the past.

He provides:

My spirituality has changed my lens on how I see religion. I don't put myself in those situations to battle people about their thoughts I just don't go. I have walked out of sermons when the pastor started preaching a homophobic message because that's disrespectful.

Candice admits the only reason she continues to attend the Black Church is her relationship with her mother. She remarks that she is not anti the Black Church, but it is not for her. She would prefer just attending bible study and does not like when Sunday sermons start singling out any group of people for being gay, "there is so much negative messages I would rather not go, but mom wants me to go so I go."

### **Summary**

A report from the Pew Research Center demonstrates that over a seven year period, denominations that fall under the Black Church have become more accepting of homosexuality and believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society (2015). The report shows a significant increase for the National Baptist Convention, in 2007 only 35% of individuals that identified with this denomination were accepting of homosexuality, but seven years later 54% are accepting of homosexuality. Other Black Church denominations also saw 7% increases in the

acceptance of homosexuality among its members. Nevertheless behind the doors of the Black Church the acceptance of homosexuality can seem non-existence for LGBs.

For sexual minorities dissociating from the Black Church is not easy and often could mean the loss of familial and community relationships. Leaving the Black Church for participants in this study did not result in the loss of parental relationships, but some expressed that they are not as close to their parents as they once were. However the thought of maintaining a relationship with the church was way too much to bear for some LGBs. Once leaving the Black Church, LGBs affirm their sexual identities as inherently part of who they are, rejecting the biblical idea that homosexuality is sin. In general, sexual minorities believe after leaving the church, God would not have created them if their sexual identity was a sin (Quinn et al. 2016).

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This research study examines the lived experiences of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the Black Church. There is slight variation in their experiences but all shared stories of pain, frustration, struggle, isolation, and freedom. E. Franklin Frazier (1990:8) posits the Black Church has “provided places of worship that black people could own and offered a community of comfort, nurture, and care among an outcast people. A refuge in a hostile white world, where they could sing, shout, laugh, and cry among those who understood and shared their pain.” Despite being a powerful entity, the Black Church currently occupies a complicated position among religious institutions and the LGBTQ+ community. Scholars have suggested the Black Church’s anti-homosexual stance exists to counter the perception of sexuality in the African American community being perverse (Griffin 2006; Dyson 2003; Boykin 1996). The first recorded anti-homosexual public protest from the Black Church occurred during the Harlem Renaissance by African American Pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr. He used his influence to ignite a “crusade against homosexuality,” that provided justification for other pastors and ministers to preach against such behavior (Wirth 2002). More than eight decades later the Black Church is still preaching the same divisive homophobic messages.

Scripture holds a sacred place in the Black Church and plays an important role in the faith and value system of its members. The issue of homosexuality has become a moral argument that has divided congregations, households, and the African American community. Some church congregants find the issue of homosexuality immoral; others practice avoidance, and others are conflicted by the traditional Black Church perspective as society continues to evolve towards acceptance. The struggle for sexual minorities in the Black Church is complex and fueled by

religious doctrine. Constantly hearing “homosexuality is a sin” can be detrimental for LGBs “actively struggling with understanding and accepting their own sexual identity” (Quinn et al. 2016:1712). This study affirms the negative impact the Black Church has on sexual minorities, as documented by previous research (Barnes 2013; Chaney 2008; Toulouse 2002; Fone 2000).

### **Key Findings**

Qualitatively examining the experiences of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals provides voice to individual experiences that serve as collective insight into: (1) church involvement, (2) identity development and management, (3) homophobic stigma, and (4) how these experiences impact their current views about religion and the Black Church. These findings demonstrate the concessions sexual minorities make to maintain family relationships and their membership in the Black Church. Although there is substantial diversity within the Black Church, the themes that emerged from this study were consistent across the majority of the participant responses. This study asserts attending the Black Church as a sexual minority is not an easy journey and has long lasting impact on the individual.

For most participants, growing up in a religious household and regularly attending church was central to their childhood and early experiences with the Black Church were mostly positive. Although participants reported not having a choice about church attendance because it was what their families did, over time they became actively involved in church activities. Even when participants did have the option of not being so active in church, most continued to be involved until they left their home church to attend college. As most participants began to grow into an awareness of their sexuality this significantly impacted their church experience in a negative manner. They began to struggle with how to situate what they were feeling with the

homonegative messages they would hear promoted by their pastor and supported with biblical scriptures.

For most of the participants, constantly hearing homonegative messages within the church led them to question their relationship with the church, religion, faith, and sexual identity. Several participants expressed a desire to fit into the heterosexual norms that are preached in the Black Church, because doing so would make life easier for them and they would be able to maintain their sense of belonging and value in the Black Church. During this time participants accepted the invisible personal discrimination that they experienced from the church. Which given the relationship between the African American family and the Black Church it is not surprising participants did not reveal their sexual identity until after they left the family church. Many participants concealed their sexual identity, while at the same time praying it would go away. They expressed not wanting to bring shame to their families or damage other critical relationships.

Griffin (2006) asserts when the Black Church uses key scriptures in the *Bible* as weapons in the battle against homosexuality it creates internal discrimination against one minority group within a minority group. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants shared how they struggled to reconcile their sexual and religious identities as one when they were constantly hearing how you couldn't be both and expect to receive Gods' love. Even when suppressing their sexual identity for their religious identity, LGBs still grappled with where and how do they fit in the Black Church environment? The stigma LGBs experienced reinforced the belief that the Black Church was not fully available to sexual minorities. Feeling like the homonegative messages preached were targeted at them lead to feelings of isolation, self-hate, and shame. All

of which is consistent with previous research studies on sexual minorities and religious institutions (Quinn et al. 2016; Quinn and Dickson-Gomez 2015; Barnes 2013; Chaney 2008).

From most participant responses it was evident that their pastors overwhelmingly did not condone homosexuality. Most pastors thought of it as a choice or a spirit and not a lifestyle, which is not surprising given the heteronormative Black Church culture. Most participants recalled their pastor often adding the message “love the sinner, hate the sin” to a homophobic sermon. This ideology is heavily promoted in the Black Church and has been observed in other research studies concerning homosexuality and the church (Boykin 1996; Chaney 2008; Barnes 2009; Wilson, Wittlin, Munoz-Laboy, and Parker 2011). For most participants this message was confusing because they struggled to determine how a Christian would love them unconditionally when their sexual identity was demonized from the pulpit. LGBs are more likely to internalize homophobia when negative messages come from a highly respected individual they know (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, and Walters 2011). The homonegativity and stigma experienced by LGBs from the Black Church was particularly detrimental because it came from the one place they expected to be supported, respected, and loved.

Additionally, for participants the discrimination/trauma they experienced in the Black Church coupled with the difficulty of trying to integrate their faith, religion, and sexual identity into who they were, served as the primary reason for them identifying as spiritual versus religious. Participants did not use one universal definition of what it meant to be spiritual, instead based on their previous religious experience developed a counter spiritual experience for themselves. For some this meant diving deeper into scriptures used to point out homosexuality as sin to offer a counter critique to the Black Church ideology. For others this meant developing a relationship with God that was not contingent on their previous church teachings. For others it

meant rejecting the idea of God, but knowing there is some type of higher power. Yet, for others it meant believing in a combination of religious symbols (gospel music, God, etc.) but selecting what to believe about Christianity.

A significant finding in this research study emerged from two participants that served as Evangelists. These individuals performed speaking engagements throughout their respective local areas preaching the same homophobic messages they heard from their pastors all the while struggling with their own sexual identity. Both participants served as an Evangelist for seven years, and after the experience learned to reconcile this part of their Black Church experience through self-healing. They learned how to embrace their sexuality and survive the pain they inflicted on themselves and others in private. They expressed that serving as an Evangelist and sharing homophobic messages while dealing with their own sexual identity issues is something that you don't get over, but you learn how to deal with it. Being away from the Black Church afforded both participants the opportunity to think freely for themselves and start learning scriptures for themselves.

Going off to college proved to be the turning point for all participants in this study, as it was the first time they were away from home and not under their parents' rule of having to attend church. Away from their home church, participants recognized the negative impact the Black Church had on their sexual identity development and most decided to distance themselves from the church. Being in college also coincided with being away from relationships developed with other church members that served as a second family and their local community. During this time of disassociation, some participants began to study other religions, cultures, and faiths, find an LGBTQ+ community on their campus, but most importantly they all made the decision to come out to themselves. The decision to come out was not one that came easily, but all

participants admitted it was the right decision for their personal, emotional, and mental well-being. Participants have also directly or indirectly come out their families which has been met with both acceptance and disapproval. While some participants eventually went back, others continue to keep their distance from the Black Church.

Goffman's (1963) Stigma scholarship acknowledges stigmatized individuals make every attempt to pass as the defined normal for spaces. This was the reality for participants in this study. After going off to college, participants were no longer interested in role flexing or modifying their behavior to stay connected to the Black Church. The decision to keep their sexual identity concealed while attending the Black Church was a protective measure against the ridicule, gossip, and shame for themselves and families. Scholars contend LGBs often exist in a society that is in between discrimination and beyond the gay closet (Orne 2013; Seidman 2002; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009).

Based on the findings, this study sheds light on the challenging and harsh reality of experiences for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the Black Church. While the Black Church is in a position to contribute positively to the lives of LGBs, it has become a place of condemnation, stress, and pain. Being in the Black Church as a sexual minority complicates one's intersecting identities and personal development. Many participants shared they could not be their authentic self [a Christian gay male, or a Christian lesbian woman, or a Christian queer person] in the Black Church because they knew they would not be fully accepted by the pastor or congregation. Instead because of the stigma they experienced participants tailored their interactions and behaviors, hid their sexual identities, and eventually disengaged with the Black Church and religion.



Ideologies surrounding homosexuality in the Black Church are profoundly rooted in history and scripture. Despite increased attitudes among congregants that homosexuality should be accepted by society, some Black Churches continue to not welcome and may never welcome LGBs into their congregations. Just as the Black Church has evolved around women serving as pastor's and leaders, reducing stigma associated with homosexuality is critical for this institution to thrive in these changing times.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the overwhelmingly negative Black Church experience reported by LGBs. While the study was exploratory, gathering a larger sample may have resulted in more themes emerging and a broader representation of experiences in the Black Church. Another limitation was the sample representation, which included majority gay males, the gender in-balance remained despite intentional efforts to include more individuals that identified as lesbian and bisexual. Another limitation of this study, was the absence of LGBs currently attending the Black Church. Obtaining the narratives of LGBs currently attending the Black Church could have provided a more diverse representation of experiences for this population. The participants in this sample were also college educated, which leaves out the un-college educated LGB individual experience with the Black Church.

### **Future Research Directions**

This research study was exploratory and focused on gathering knowledge about the lived experience of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the Black Church. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for participants to provide narratives that were rich with information. Future

research on sexual minorities in the Black Church may want to narrow the research objective to focus on more specific topics. One topic of particular interest would be to dig deep into examining how sexual minorities define spirituality after the Black Church? As discovered through this study all 14 participants no longer identify as religious, to learn more about how they live their lives as a spiritual sexual minority would contribute to the literature. Participants in this research study were all college educated, future research should also focus on trying to obtain/include the narratives of those who do not have a college education. Results from this study suggests stigma experienced among LGBs can be best understood through intersectionality. Future research seeking to explain the multiple interlocking identities of minority LGBs should be explored as such, determining how they experiences overlapping stigma. Additionally, another research objective to explore is identity management and identity integration for sexual minorities in the Black Church. This study suggests this is a significant issue that could use further exploration. Finally, LGBs that are still involved in the Black Church begs for an in-depth examination. Given the complexity of the Black Church these topics are well worth future examination.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

These findings make an important contribution to research on Queer/LGBTQ+ Studies, Religion, and Race. The findings shed light on the internal and external struggles lesbians, gays, and bisexuals experience in the Black Church which serves to fill in gaps in the literature. Only recently have research studies started examining the specific experiences of minority sexual minorities and the impact of religion without the intersection of some medical condition. Using Intersectionality and stigma as a guiding framework highlighted how deep the Black Church

impacts LGBs on some many levels of their lived experiences. It is important to understand the cultural, personal, and religious context of one's experience from their vantage point to fully grasp how their intersecting identities and environments impact how they interact with society.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
 Office of Research & Commercialization  
 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
 Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
 Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

**Approval of Human Research**

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
 FWA00000351, IRB0001138**

To: **Edwanna Andrews**

Date: **February 06, 2017**

Dear Researcher:

On 02/06/2017 the IRB approved the following human participant research until 02/05/2018 inclusive:

Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form  
 Expedited Review  
 Project Title: Examining the lived experiences of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals  
 in the Black Church  
 Investigator: Edwanna Andrews  
 IRB Number: SBE-16-12723  
 Funding Agency:  
 Grant Title:  
 Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 02/05/2018, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) post the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Kamille Chaparro on 02/06/2017 05:25:53 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## Interview questions

### Demographic Questions

- Age
- Gender
- Do you identify as gay or bisexual?
- Ethnicity
- Do you hold a church leadership role? If yes, what role?
- Outside of Sunday worship service, how many additional church related services or activities do you attend on a weekly basis?
- What church denomination do/did you attend?
- When did you start attending your current Church?

### Interview Questions

- Did you grow up in a religious household? (Religious household defined as- regular church attendance of more than twice a month)
- Do you currently attend a denomination within the Black Church?
- Why do you attend your church?
  - Is it important to you to attend a Black Church?
- Is religion important to you? Why?
- Do you currently attend church with any relatives (relatives defined as- blood family members)?
- Are you out?
  - Is there any group or place where you are not out?
- What is your church's stance on homosexuality and same-sex marriage?
  - What has your experience been like at your church?
- Do you feel like you can fully be who you are in your church?
- Do you believe your church is aware of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual members?
  - Are these individuals accepted by anyone?
- What impact has being in the Black Church had on your own identity as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person?
  - Has it shaped/influenced/impacted your understanding of your sexual identity?
- Do you find your church's religious teachings and your views towards homosexuality differ?
  - If they do differ, in what ways?
- Have you ever left the Black Church for any time because you identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual? What was that experience like for you? What prompted your return?
- Have you experienced any struggles related to your sexuality and the Black Church?
- Have you experienced any stigma in church or from congregants because of your sexual identity?
  - What was that/those experience(s) like?

## **APPENDIX C: THEMATIC ANALYSIS DATA**



<b>Theme</b>	<b>Growing up in the Black Church</b>	<b>Stories of Intersectionality</b>	<b>Stigma from/within the Black Church</b>	<b>Breaking free from the Black Church</b>
<b>Pattern</b>	13/14	13/14	14/14	13/14
<b>Sub-themes</b>	Religious household	Sexual identity vs. religious identity	Homonegative messages from within the Black Church	Religious vs. Spiritual
<b>Sub-themes</b>	Parental church involvement	Pray It Away	Heterosexual church environment	College defining experience- being away from home
<b>Sub-themes</b>	Adolescence/Teen church involvement	Evangelism 2/14		Personal relationship/ understanding

## **APPENDIX D: ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEFENSE**

Announcing the Final Examination of Edwanna A. S. Andrews for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

Date: June 29, 2017

Time: 10:00 a.m.

Room: HPH 406I

Dissertation title: "Damned To Hell": The Black Church Experience for Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

Despite increased acceptance nationally towards same-sex sexuality, intolerance within the Black Church against those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) continues to persist. As one of the most important institutions in the African American community, the significance of the Black Church makes the religious experience particularly influential. LGBs frequently experience homonegativity in the Black Church in the form of homophobic laced sermons, Microaggressions, and church gossip. The stigma LGBs encounter around homosexuality in the Black Church has created a dissonance between their religious beliefs, faith, and sexual identity.

This study explores the multifaceted experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in Black Church. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Patricia Hill Collins' Intersectionality and Erving Goffman's Stigma, this research focuses on how the intersections of one's religious and sexual identities is impacted and influenced by stigma experienced within the Black Church. This study is based on 14 in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who attended the Black Church and reveals the complex relationship LGBs experience trying to integrate their religious and sexual identities. Additionally, participant narratives provides insight into the impact of homonegative stigma sexual minorities experience in the Black Church.

Outline of Studies:

Major: Sociology

Educational Career:

B.A., 1999, University of Central Florida

M.A., 2005, University of Central Florida

Committee in Charge:

Dr. David Gay

Dr. Elizabeth Grauerholz

Dr. Amy Donley

Dr. Ty Matejowsky

Approved for distribution by Dr. David A. Gay, Committee Chair, on June 11, 2017.

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