

IDENTITY RECONCILIATION AND RELIGIOUS AGENCY
IN GAY AND LESBIAN EPISCOPAL CLERGY

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INTRODUCTION

The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in the United States won a significant civil rights battle when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in 2015, and a majority of Americans now support same-sex marriage and accept homosexuality (PewResearch 2016a). However, notable conflict between the LBGT community and individuals and organized religion remains, as evidenced by the United Methodist Church's ruling in April 2017 that the recent consecration of a lesbian bishop violated church law. According to UMC doctrine, homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" (Goodstein 2017).

The choice to continue participating in religious organizations whose formal policies, structures, and doctrines challenge the overlapping identities of "Christian" and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is one that merits sociological inquiry. For some non-heterosexual Christians, a third identity enters the picture – that of ordained clergy. This third identity intensifies the salience of the first two; a Christian clergy person follows their religious beliefs and practices to a full-time vocation, and the increased scrutiny and expectations of clergy can shine an uncomfortable spotlight on issues of sexuality. To examine the "incompatibility" between homosexuality and Christianity, this study investigates the integration of homosexual and Christian identities at the micro level, among gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy. While such persons possess a gay or lesbian sexual identity, they also embody the institutional church as ordained clergy. Examining their processes of integrating homosexual and Christian identities provides a deeper understanding of the larger social conflict between homosexuality and Christianity; and because of their unique position vis a vis religion and sexuality, the

experiences of gay and lesbian clergy can also reveal important information about the strategies and practices utilized by individuals as they attempt to transform religious institutions. This thesis asks how gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy reconcile and maintain their religious and sexual identities, and what strategies of religious agency they demonstrate as they work for a more just and inclusive church.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature addresses the process of identity reconciliation in persons who have a gay or lesbian sexual identity and a meaningful religious identity, discusses the likelihood that the two identities can be integrated successfully, and identifies strategies used in the reconciliation process. Studies also investigate the process of combining a gay sexual identity with a religious vocation; studies of lesbian clergy are rare to non-existent. One researcher has also taken up the question of whether gay and lesbian persons have unique qualifications for religious ministry.

Sexual and Religious Identity Reconciliation

Both psychological and sociological literature inform the field of reconciling sexual and religious identities. The psychological theory of cognitive dissonance illuminates the motivation for undertaking such a reconciliation: “Generalizing the dynamics of cognitive dissonance may be useful in interpreting the condition of two incongruent identities being held by the same person. While many persons may hold incongruent identities in a workable tension, these identities seldom both function as organizing ‘core identities’ of the self-concept” (Thumma 1991:335). For homosexual Christians, however, both their sexual and religious identities do seem to function as ‘core identities.’ “The identities, as originally construed, are mutually exclusive; however, they are also considered too important to surrender. This dissonance between the identities functions as a motive for change, or dissonance reduction...” (Thumma 1991:335). Sociology further informs the sub-field of sexual-religious identity reconciliation by viewing such negotiations through the lens of socialization: “Identity negotiation can best be understood as a facet of adult socialization...Socialization is the

process by which the self internalizes social meanings, reinterprets them, and in turn, responds back upon society” (Thumma 1991:334). Much of the sociological literature focuses on strategies and social influences observed in the negotiation process. Persons who have a minority sexual identity as well as a religious identity would seem to have four options: first, rejecting the religious identity; second, rejecting the homosexual identity; third, compartmentalization, or “keeping their religion out of the homosexual parts of their lives, and keeping their homosexuality out of their religious lives”; and fourth, identity integration, where “gays and lesbians...combine their two identities rather than keeping them in separate spheres of their life” (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000:334). The latter option, integration, occurs more than might seem probable. One of the first scholarly explorations of identity reconciliation in individuals who claim both a Christian and homosexual identity, found that the reconciliation process need not result in the abandonment of one of the two seemingly opposed identities: “Accommodation of discrepant identities does not always result in an either/or decision that destroys one of the identities. Rather, identities negotiation can be construed as a process in which much of these identities remains intact” (Thumma 1991:334). In fact, ethnographic research with gay and lesbian Christians has revealed that rather than feeling conflicted between their sexual and religious identities, many find their core identity in “living the contradiction.” This research focuses on

the processes whereby lesbian and gay Christians forge an integration of Christian doctrine, spirituality and sexuality... this integrative struggle is experienced by lesbian and gay Christians as a *raison d'être*. Wrestling this contradiction has given rise to a particular expression of queer Christian identity. Among the many implications of these expressions of queer Christian identity is their impact on mainstream Christian congregations and Christian ideologies and practices. (O'Brien 2004:182)

Studies acknowledge that reconciling sexual and religious identities is made more difficult, though not impossible, by anti-LGBT sentiment and activism in the religious sphere:

Hostility towards homosexuality, expressed by many Christians, has not prevented some people from experiencing homosexual sex, identifying themselves as gay or lesbian, celebrating such an identity, struggling for legal and social equality with heterosexuals, or reconciling their gay or lesbian and Christian identities (Walton 2006:2).

Yip investigated the persistence of faith among non-heterosexuals using qualitative and quantitative means and found that reconciling sexual and religious identity was not easy.

The study respondents

did... experience...identity dissonance when they first confronted their sexualities within a Christian framework...their dissident identities, which now harmoniously incorporate their sexualities and Christianity, were indeed constructed through a long and winding process. This process, or a “journey,” as most respondents preferred to call it, involves both psychological and social adjustments (Yip 2002:203).

Despite the difficulties, however,

Both quantitative and qualitative data showed that the majority of respondents in general still considered the institutionalized churches relevant to their everyday lives and spiritual nurturing. These respondents also, as Dillon (1999) argued, engaged in doctrinal reinterpretation to effect positive changes within the institution...In spite of the negative official positions of the churches, the majority persisted in churchgoing (Yip 2002:204).

Melissa Wilcox (2003) conducted research among 117 LGBT persons drawn from mailing lists of two Metropolitan Community Churches to understand how they reconciled their sexual and religious identities. “...many LGBT Christians face a serious dilemma when they acknowledge their sexual or gender identity. While they may feel that LGBT identity is...a positive part of their being, many religious groups teach otherwise. This conflict of opinions is something that LGBT Christians must solve

internally” (2003:53). Wilcox analyzed survey data and qualitative interviews with her sample to describe five patterns of reconciliation. First is “Separating Religion and LGBT Identity”: “For some people, sexuality and gender identity are unrelated to either religion or spirituality” (2003:63). The second pattern is “Grappling with Each Identity in Succession.” This pattern involves “reject[ing] religion initially (usually because it has rejected them)...” then “explor[ing] their sexual or gender identity and generally becom[ing] wholeheartedly accepting of it,” and finally, experiencing a desire for spiritual or religious practice, “seek[ing] a group...that will affirm them as LGBT people” (2003:64). Wilcox’ third pattern, “Relying on Spirituality,” includes respondents who rely on their personal spirituality as a support in their coming out process. A fourth pattern, “Connecting Religion and LGBT Identity,” describes persons who “experience a strong connection between spirituality and sexuality...for these people the two have never been separate” (2003:67). Finally, Wilcox found a group of participants who “relie[d] on religion-based community support...during the coming out process” (2003:68), the “Coming Out in a Religious Community” pattern.

Combining Gay or Lesbian Sexual Identity with Clergy Identity

For lesbian and gay clergy, a third identity enters into their reconciliation process alongside their sexual identities and religious identities: ordained ministers. The little scholarly research on gay and lesbian clergy in the United States has focused on [mostly] closeted gay Catholic priests. Some studies have been done on the topic focusing on gay Anglican clergy in the U.K. Keenan (2008) describes the difficulties of serving “in the closet” – while concealing a gay identity:

...personal silence [about sexual identity] is encouraged through institutional silence stemming from the refusal to engage with the stories

of active gay clergy. Therefore individuals' perceptions of the need to 'closet' illustrate the power that the institutional Church has to constrain the lives of individual clergy...existence as gay and clergy is marginal, unaffirmed, and – at least in some quarters – dangerous (Keenan 2008:170).

Certainly challenges exist for gay and lesbian clergy negotiating the combination of their sexual and vocational identities. At the same time, some would argue that the gay/lesbian life experience provides, in some ways, a background especially helpful to ministry. Shallenberger (1994) analyzed the spiritual journeys of 75 gay and lesbian persons elicited through surveys and personal interviews and found five recurring themes.

First, a marginalized perspective:

Gay men and lesbian women have seen the hypocrisy of religious institutions that espouse loving one's neighbor and, at the same time, attack them for being depraved. They have been forced to look beyond the tenets of the churches they grew up in, for most of those institutions rejected them; in doing so, they have needed to question deeply the basis for their faith. Out of this experience of challenge, they have developed a spiritual freedom and have come to take responsibility for their own spirituality in a way that those who are less alienated by society may never have to do...In the process, one comes to place high values on integrity (Shallenberger 1994:108).

Second, the study found that participants shared comfort with the intangible and the ambiguous: "For these men and women core aspects of our religions that are inherently intangible, amorphous, paradoxical, and blurred---are often more comfortably handled and expressed than they would have been without these teaching experiences [learning to reconcile their sexual and religious identities]" (1994:109). The third theme was empathy with and compassion for the disenfranchised and a commitment to social justice: "Gay men and lesbian women know what it is to face troubling questions of personal identity, and to be the objects of hatred and prejudice... The grace of this situation, ironically, is that living through rejection...gives one a sensitivity and ability to be empathetic to

others...”(1994:109). Fourth, gay and lesbian persons have an enhanced understanding of God that comes from being a “survivor”: “As ministers, gay men and lesbian women can bring a special clarity and strength to their communities. They are living testimonies of the ability to survive incredible pain and adversity and grow in faith” (1994:111). Finally, the process of self-reflection undertaken by religious gay and lesbian persons is valuable for ministry: “Each one of these people has done a great deal of exploration in his or her life, trying to understand his or her identity in relation to God... As a minister, one needs to trust the relationship between an individual and God, and the paths that relationship takes” (1994:112). Keenan’s study themes all support the idea that gay and lesbian persons possess particular gifts for religious ministry.

Religious Agency

Little scholarly research has been performed regarding the agency and strategies of gay and lesbian lay persons or clergy within institutional religion. However, scholars have investigated the experiences of women within gender traditional religions. In these faith traditions, women are considered ineligible for leadership roles, certain roles in public worship, and contributing to church policy decisions. Burke (2012) identifies four forms of women’s agency described in the literature. The first type is resistance, which “focuses on the agency of women participating in gender-traditional religions who attempt to challenge or change some aspect of the religion” (Burke 2012:124). Second, women may practice empowerment agency, where “women use religion to empower themselves in their daily lives, focusing mostly on affect, or how religion makes [them] feel” (2012:126). The third type is instrumental agency, where “women use their participation in gender-traditional religions for advantages in non-religious aspects of

their lives” (2012:126). Fourth, women may exhibit compliant agency, which Burke argues is a type of agency even though it does not involve women consciously conflicting with or freeing themselves from the gender-traditional religious environment. Rather,

...one woman who liberally interprets sacred texts about women’s proper role within her religion does not exhibit more agency than another woman who interprets those same texts in a way that uphold gender-traditionalism. Rather, both women draw from their experiences and everyday life in order to exhibit agency through the practice of interpreting (2012:128).

Michele Dillon (1999) described the actions of groups within the Roman Catholic Church who, while disagreeing with official Church doctrine on reproduction and sexuality, nonetheless remained within the church. Here is an example of exerting influence from within church structure, rather than rejecting it outright:

...pro-change Catholics’ articulation of the possibilities of Catholicism is not a strategy dictated by powerlessness or an uncritical organizational loyalty. It flows, rather, from their deliberate commitment to remain within the Catholic community. With the option of organizational exit available to them, but rejected by them, pro-change Catholics work to achieve institutional change from within the church, and in the process, they change some of the meanings and practices of Catholicism (Dillon 1999:85).

Types of women’s agency within the Roman Catholic Church are analyzed as micro-level strategies in the work of Leming (2007), who labels such activity as “religious agency”:

“...a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity” (Leming 2007:74). Leming looks at the agentic acts of Catholic women as

points of resistance (Foucault 1978) which open up space for change to occur...points of resistance and potential transformation...express women’s Catholic commitment by enabling them both to express their Catholic identity and their alignment with Catholic tradition and to resist aspects of Catholicism that they find constraining rather than life giving (Leming 2007:80).

An analysis of the in-depth interview transcripts of 33 Catholic women resulted in identifying three primary religious agency strategies. First were “strategies of gaining voice,” utilizing such techniques as claiming and telling women’s stories and “confronting talk,” or “using strategic opportunity to challenge elites, usually priests” (Leming 2007:84). Further, “The women interviewed recognized that their voices and stories are, at best, underutilized and sometimes even ignored or silenced in church. They posed the question of who gets to speak in church settings, or put more colloquially as it was by Edith, ‘who has the say’” (2007:83). Leming described the second set of strategies as “Place and Space – Sacred Space as Contested Terrain” (2007:85). She reported:

...a surprising number of ...women portrayed their altar service narratives as symbolic of the desire to respond to a call to be close to God and their realization that sacred space is contested terrain. This was true even for the majority of my respondents who did not personally feel called to priesthood. The women told of constructing paths, places, and spaces as a means of claiming their place in Catholicism. All of these strategies can effect change in church structure by creating spaces for new things to occur - a decision reversed, a group where dialogue takes place, more interaction between women and church elites (Leming 2007:85).

One particular type of “space” strategy was described as “way-making” by one of Leming’s participants: “Gramma used to say this: ‘There’s more than one way to skin a cat.’ And you work around him [the pastor], you know? I suppose maybe now that’s why I decide there are sometimes, I have to circumvent things and I have to – I have to make it work” (2007:85). Other respondents described efforts to “creat[e] both personal and communal spaces for women within Catholicism...includ[ing] creating physical spaces for prayer that were women affirming, for example, including feminine images or sculptures” (2007:85-86). Finally, Leming described strategies of “flexible alignment:”

Flexibility is an important dynamic in that it allows [the women] to adapt their positions vis-à-vis church whereas rigidity would more likely lead to

exit...taken together, flexible alignment strategies allow people to position themselves with reference to structural religion in ways that help them negotiate religious identity and other valued identities (Leming 2007:86-87).

Another study among gay Anglican priests in the U.K. discovered a particular type of flexible alignment strategy: separating “God” from “church.” Keenan (2016) used qualitative and quantitative methods to study 20 gay Anglican clergy, finding that “...gay clergy, though feeling called by God into the service of the institutional Church, face a lack of acceptance from that very Church” (Keenan 2016:173). As a result, Keenan found, many clergy make a mental distinction between their understanding of God and their personal relationship to God, and the institutional Church. For example:

For Anthony the feeling of acceptance and support from God with regard to sexuality is so strong that it can be used as support in actively standing against prevailing attitudes in Church. Through questioning the links between Church and God, locating acceptance with God and rejection with Church, respondents are able to find the interpretive space in which to challenge dominant views (Keenan 2016:183).

The current study builds upon the existing literature on reconciliation of religious and non-heterosexual identities by asking how gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy reconcile and maintain their dual identities, and what resources are utilized in this process, and also interrogates the combination of a gay or lesbian sexual identity with a religious vocation. In addition, it furthers research on religious agency by investigating the strategies used by gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy to work for a more just and inclusive Church.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH and HOMOSEXUALITY

The Episcopal Church first became a national headline in coverage of the conflict between LGBT persons and Christianity in 2003, when an openly gay, partnered Episcopal priest named Gene Robinson was consecrated as the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire. However, the history of lesbian and gay activism within the church began much earlier. Carter Heyward was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church as part of the Philadelphia Eleven, a group of women who underwent ordination by a retired bishop in 1974 in violation of the denomination's proscription of female priests. Rev. Heyward would later begin marrying same-sex couples in the church when Massachusetts voted to legalize such marriages, in opposition to official Episcopal policy at the time. Heyward wrote,

I believe (as do many others) that, for the Church to change, the Church must act its way into new ways of thinking. The Episcopal Church will not be able to think its way successfully toward an inclusive gay-affirming reimagining of Christian marriage until there are gay and lesbian Episcopalians who are married...The canons and liturgies catch up with people's lives over time (Heyward 2010:23-24).

The accuracy of this description of the process of change in regards to the attitude, doctrine and policy toward the LGBT community in the Episcopal Church has been borne out in events before and after Robinson's 2003 consecration.

In addition to the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven group of women to the priesthood, 1974 also saw the beginnings of the pro-LGBT organization Integrity. Within two years of its birth, the organization had spread to many cities in the nation and successfully promoted three LGBT-friendly resolutions at the 1976 Episcopal General Convention. Among them was Resolution A-69, which declared, "That it is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full

and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” (General Convention 1977).

Ellen Marie Barrett, the first co-president of Integrity and an openly lesbian woman, was ordained as a Deacon in the Episcopal Church in 1975, having been rejected by her Bishop and her diocese Standing Committee on Ministry for ordination twice before. The 1975 ritual occurred with little to no controversy. But when Deacon Barrett requested ordination to the priesthood in 1976, a firestorm of controversy broke out. Extensive press coverage of the ordination and criticism from the bishop’s colleagues and the priests he oversaw led to a 1977 House of Bishops’ resolution that proclaimed “Our present understanding of the Bible and Christian theology makes it inadmissible for this Church to authorize the ordination of anyone who advocates and/or willfully and habitually practices homosexuality” (Holmen 2013:119). In other words, bishops could ordain openly gay or lesbian persons to the priesthood, but only if they were committed to celibacy. The House of Bishops’ decision was taken up for discussion in the 1979 General Convention, which resolved that “we believe it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practicing homosexual, or any person who is engaged in heterosexual relations outside of marriage” (General Convention 1980:C-93).

Despite this official policy, progressive bishops ordained each year “on average at least five open, noncelibate lesbians or gays” (Holmen 2013:135) in various U.S. dioceses beginning in 1977. At the 1994 General Convention, the House of Bishops offered a “dialogical, teaching, study document...intended to carry the church forward in ‘continuing dialogue’ (Holmen 2013:142) on the issue of ordaining homosexual persons. In this “Pastoral” document, the bishops allowed for the ordination of “only persons

believe[d] to be a wholesome example to their people” (Holmen 2013:143). This reinforced the slippage between practice and doctrine, providing a “conscience clause” for progressive bishops to fall back on if questioned about their ordination practices.

The controversy came to a canonical head in the heresy trial of Bishop Walter Righter in 1996. Righter had ordained an openly gay man to the diaconate, and was the assistant to Bishop John Spong, an ardent advocate of LGBT rights in the Episcopal Church. The seven-to-one decision by the highest Episcopal court was that there was “no core doctrine prohibiting the ordination of a non-celibate, homosexual person living in a faithful and committed sexual relationship with a person of the same sex” (Holmen 2013:151). For several years, progressive bishops continued to ordain openly gay and lesbian persons, while conservative bishops continued to block such ordinations. The 2003 consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, combined with the elevation of Katharine Jefferts Schori as the first female Presiding Bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church, intensified the conflict over homosexuality in the wider Anglican Communion. Churches in the more conservative global South and like-minded parishes in the U.S. began to find ways to separate from the more liberal Americans. Despite this conflict, The General Convention of 2009 officially affirmed that “God has called and may call [homosexual] persons to any ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church” (Holmen 2013:217). Conservative bishops who cannot in good conscience support ordaining LGBT persons do not themselves have to do so. But they must make provision for such candidates to be examined and ordained in a neighboring diocese.

In early 2016, the Archbishops of the global Anglican Communion voted to suspend the Episcopal Church’s participation in the communion due to their practice of

ordaining openly gay and lesbian persons, and creating a liturgy to be used in same-sex marriages in the U.S. For three years, "... Episcopal leaders will not be allowed to represent the Anglican Communion at meetings with other churches or other faiths, will not be appointed or elected to internal committees and will not be allowed to participate in decisions in the Anglican Communion 'relating to doctrine or polity'" (Goodstein and de Preytas-Tamura 2016).

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study was obtained through semi-structured, qualitative interviews with fourteen Episcopal gay and lesbian clergy. Included in the sample for this study are participants in their thirties through their seventies, and who have served as Episcopal clergy from two to fifty-four years. This provides a time-series effect on experiences across the last four decades of Episcopal policy on ordaining gay and lesbian clergy.

Qualitative research methods were chosen for the study as uniquely suited to research questions that concern social phenomena and their meaning to participants: “Quantitative research is not particularly useful in revealing the meanings people ascribe to particular events or activities; nor is it well suited to understanding complicated social processes in context. In contrast, qualitative research involves the scrutiny of social phenomena” (Esterberg 2002:2). Qualitative methods are also important for this study because the topic involves a group of people who have been historically dispossessed of voice and power. Using qualitative methods, which begin with the lived experience of the participants, has a lesser chance of continuing that dispossession ((Esterberg 2002:12). Within qualitative research methods, semi-structured life-world interviews are defined as a technique for “obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon” (Kvale 2007:8). An interpretive social science paradigm is indicated when project goals focus on understanding and describing meaningful social action, and human beings are seen as “social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds” (Neuman 2003:16).

Participants for the study were drawn from approximately 28 openly gay and lesbian retired and active Episcopal clergy in a large metropolitan Midwestern diocese. Four participants were invited by the researcher, being known to her. A list of fourteen additional potential participants was drawn up by two of the original four participants, which included gay and lesbian clergy known to be open about their sexual identity. These fourteen were invited by the key informant, and ten responded to the researcher as willing to participate. The sample included nine men and five women, ranging in age and length of time as ordained clergy as described above. Each participant was interviewed in a location of their choosing; interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Coding: Sexual, Religious, and Clergy Identities

Coding of the data about reconciliation of sexual and religious identities involved successive readings of interview transcripts, focusing on the material elicited by questions about the participants' religious upbringing, and the events and experiences that led to their self-identification and subsequent "coming out" as gay or lesbian. The first reading identified passages that discussed the experiences, relationships, resources, and actions related to reconciling and maintaining Christian and gay/lesbian identities. A second reading identified two types of material within those passages: first, reconciliation self-reflections, wherein participants described the nature of the relationship between Christian and gay/lesbian identities, and/or the effect of coming out as gay or lesbian on their relationship with God; and second, resources -- books, classes, relationships reported as helpful to reconciliation process by participant. The reconciliation self-reflections were then further analyzed using the patterns of identity reconciliation

described by Wilcox (2003), and the pattern with the best fit for each participant was identified. Coding of participant narratives with a focus on resources such as books, classes, relationships reported as helpful to reconciliation process by participant yielded twelve types of resources, which were then reduced into six categories: mentors; learning resources; liberal religious communities; faith; the LGBT community; and secular resources.

To identify clergy experiences involving the combining of gay/lesbian sexual identity with that of ordained clergy, transcript sections related to the questions “What was happening in your life when you perceived a call to ordained ministry?”, and “Has your sexual orientation been a help or hindrance in your ministry?” were examined. Material related to the participants’ personal and professional negotiations with the role of Episcopal clergy was coded first, then a second reading revealed patterns among those experiences. Two broad categories appeared: first, challenges and concerns related to being a gay or lesbian Episcopal clergy, and second, how the participants saw their sexual orientation as a gift or benefit for ministry. Within the first category, four types of challenges were reported by participants: first, the difficulties of undertaking a social life as a gay or lesbian clergy; second, concerns over the worthiness or acceptableness of a gay or lesbian person seeking ordination; third, the search for a denomination that would ordain gay or lesbian clergy; and four, concerns about finding employment as a lesbian priest. In terms of how a gay or lesbian sexual orientation might be a benefit to ministry, clergy articulated two primary ideas: first, an awareness and experience of social dynamics of power and powerlessness; and second, a strengthening of their pastoral work with parish members.

Coding: Religious Agency

Interview transcripts were read successive times, focusing on passages of participant reflection on their decision to pursue ordination, and answers to the question “How has your sexual orientation played out in your ministry?” The first round of coding identified stories of clergy acting intentionally within Episcopal structure to promote a more just and inclusive Church; a second round of coding was conducted using categories from Leming (2007) – strategies of Gaining Voice, Making Space, and Flexible Alignment. This round resulted in the identification of five strategies of Gaining Voice, seven strategies of Making Space, and three strategies of Flexible Alignment.

Researcher Reflexivity

As the researcher of this study, I found my personal experience and background helpful in identifying and interviewing participants. I am a member of an Episcopal parish in the diocese where this study took place; six of the participants were known to me prior to the study, four of them relatively well; I am an ordained pastor in another tradition; and I have family members and friends who self-identify as members of the LGBT community. This background predisposed me to view my participants in a positive light, particularly as they had, in some cases, lived out their vocational commitment over many years, overcoming many difficulties inherent in the field, and many specific to gay and lesbian clergy. My own vocational path took me away from full-time ministry, so I respect clergy who have persisted in that field of endeavor.

My experience as a pastor allowed me to empathize with some of the painful and challenging aspects of my participants’ experiences, and, I think, helped to establish an open and safe environment for the in-depth interviews. My membership in an LGBT-

affirming Episcopal parish also assisted in this regard. As a result the participants, as a group, articulated many meaningful and relevant narratives about themselves and their vocation.

Reflecting on the interviews with my advisor, and using existing scholarly research to frame and interpret parts of my data, were helpful in establishing thoughtful analysis informed largely by sociological constructs and theories. I found both that I liked and respected my participants, *and* that their experiences and reflections were sociologically significant. By conducting this study I have sought to enter the scholarly conversation about identity reconciliation, marginalized persons within institutions, and religious agency by presenting and analyzing the participants' experiences.

FINDINGS: RECONCILIATION AND RESOURCES

Wilcox (2003) focused on her participants' coming out experiences vis a vis their religious and spiritual environments. Because her sample is drawn from mailing lists of two MCC churches, the majority of her sample "landed" in a homosexuality-affirming religious environment. The participants in the current study narrated a variety of chronologies in terms of self-identifying as gay/lesbian, coming out, and seeking ordination in the Episcopal Church. Some participants self-identified as gay/lesbian, then came out or were outed involuntarily, and finally, sought ordination; some self-identified as gay/lesbian, then sought ordination, and then came out or were outed. This chronology plays a role in how well participants' narratives fit into one of the five Wilcox patterns. Sometimes a participant successfully reconciled their Christian and gay/lesbian identity internally, but was then faced with serving in a ministry setting "in the closet," due to institutional Church doctrine or policies. The majority of Wilcox' participants did not experience a call to vocational ministry which tied them to a particular religious environment. Therefore, the current study uses the Wilcox patterns to understand how participants integrated their sexual and religious identities for themselves. Organized religion played a role in this process for nearly all participants; the process of negotiating with the Episcopal Church as ordained clergy will be treated in the section on combining a gay or lesbian identity with a clergy identity.

Of the fourteen interview transcripts analyzed, seven participants' experiences fit Wilcox's pattern Connecting Religion and LGBT Identity. Meryl, in her sixties, described her self-identification and coming out as experiences that deepened her relationship with God:

I don't see myself as "I'm a lesbian relating to God," I'm authentically me, hoping I can always be authentic in all my relationships. And be authentic in my relationship with God. I don't guess I like to use labels that much...At our core, we're imago dei [the image of God]. So, my understanding of myself is deepened too, to where God calls to me, where I can grow the most, and love the most, and be what God wants me to be.

Although this reconciliation self-reflection does not directly mention organized religion, the Church, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, played a role. Meryl was drawn at an early age to study religion and met secretly with a Catholic priest for instruction.

Against her family's wishes, she was baptized into the Church at 18. Due to these influences, Meryl's experience fits more closely with Wilcox' "Connecting Religion and LGBT Identity," than with the pattern "Relying on [Individual] Spirituality."

Joel, in his forties, also integrated his sexual and religious identities by connecting them. Despite being raised in a fundamental Protestant denomination in the religiously conservative South, Joel described consistent participation: "What I enjoyed was the liturgy, and the singing, and communion. I enjoyed all of the worship part. So I just thought, perhaps I'll just have to sit here and knuckle through whatever moments of exclusion exist. I didn't feel obligated. I felt interested and desirous to go." Further, the image of God that Joel constructed during his early church experiences meant that he did not experience a conflict between his identity as a Christian and his identity as a gay man:

I always felt like...God and I had a deal. Or, it was funny, because as a child, my images of God were all feminine. So I often thought of God as a nurse or helper. So it never really occurred to me that God could be kind of punishing or damning in a way that, when the church would just say that [God disapproved of homosexual/ity], it just didn't equate in my brain. So often it just felt like...I ignored it...This is going to sound crazy, but [the images of God] were rooted in...the little Sunday School flyer handouts...the handout had something like, "God is in the face of helpers, like a nurse." So they drew a nurse on there, which was a black nurse, which, maybe God is a black nurse. I can totally see that!

Three participants fit Wilcox's pattern of "Relying on Spirituality." Nathan, in his sixties, struggled to reconcile the doctrine of his conservative religious upbringing with a gay identity, and where he might fit into organized religion:

...if I was attracted to other men, if I was a man who lies with other men, then does that mean I'm an abomination? Does that mean I'm condemned to death? Does that mean I'll never get to the Kingdom of Heaven? Probably, I thought. If I don't fit into a Christian mold, what am I part of, if anything?

After leaving organized religion behind, Nathan nonetheless continued to wrestle with God, even challenging God directly at one point:

...that summer, my discomfort with my sexuality and my life of faith came to a head. I remember standing on Sunday evening, shaking my fists in the air, asking, if I was an abomination, smite me now...I actually challenged God to strike me down dead if I was an abomination...and nothing happened...I realized...that God was not judging me or killing me or causing any damage to me and that nobody was doing that, but me.

Seth, also in his sixties, was raised in the American Baptist denomination. He began to reconcile his Christian faith and gay identity while attending a progressive seminary, and began an intimate relationship with another man in the American Baptist congregation he was serving as an Associate Pastor. The denomination revoked his license for ordination, stating that he was "no longer worthy to preach the gospel." In dealing with this sexual-identity based rejection by organized religion, Seth relied on his own relationship with God:

The way that I came out was because of God, because of my relationship with God, and it's the only way that I could do it. Because it's by faith that I was able to step forward. There is no other way that I could have done it, but by faith. And people say, "What about your faith?" Yeah, what about my faith? It's because of my faith that I'm able to do the things, that I'm able to make this decision. It wasn't an absence of my faith...For me, if I had not been a person of faith I probably would have come out a lot earlier...there was always that sense of not being able to reconcile my orientation with my faith. But at the point that I was able to reconcile my

orientation with my faith, I was like, “Ah. I truly can live a faithful life. And be who I am, and be who I have been created to be.”

Roger, in his sixties, related his early efforts to “recover” from homosexual attraction. A conversation in his teen years with the pastor of his Southern Baptist Church was the beginning of these efforts: “If you want to please God, if you want to please God, if you want to be a good model, a wholesome example to other people, then you need to be moving away from this, because this is not what God wants for people. God created us male and female for heterosexual relationship.” His pastor encouraged Roger to begin dating young women, and Roger did:

It’s not that I was incapable of a physical response. And I interpreted this as meaning, okay, God’s curing me. Totally ignoring the fact that every time a cute guy walked by, I was like a cat watching birds. Totally ignoring that. And there were occasional lapses, and totally explaining those away as, “Well, you know, that’s like falling off the wagon. I’m a recovering alcoholic, and I may never get rid of my same-sex attraction, but I can grow my opposite-sex attraction.”

While attending seminary courses with progressive professors, Roger took a step forward in his reconciliation process:

...my first year in seminary, I became convinced that being gay was not wrong...But I had decided that being gay was not wrong, but I was convinced that I was not stuck there, and that I could still overcome this. It was not optimal, and I still wanted to get married...I had this belief now that, you know, you’re just not going to grow beyond this far enough until you actually have a wife and you have sex all the time...[Homosexuality is] fine in general, but I was not applying it to me. I just really, I was kind of invested into believing that God had really cured me. And so it was partly that if I don’t buy this, I have to rethink a lot of how God was involved in my life in the past.

Roger continued his reconciliation process through seminary and a graduate theological degree, finally accepting his sexual identity after his marriage ended.

The remaining four participants’ experiences fell into three patterns. One participant each described the pattern of “Separating Sexual and Religious Identities” and

“Dealing with Each Identity in Succession,” and two participants described the “Coming Out in A Religious Community” pattern. Sarah, in her forties, was not raised in a church, and thus did not feel a need for reconciling her religious and lesbian identities internally: “I think, I mean, this is a question I’ve long had, which is, if you’re not raised in any religion, can you avoid the guilt and shame around sexual – any sexual issue, not just sexual orientation?” Nonetheless, as she began a journey of joining the Roman Catholic Church, she did not identify herself as a lesbian in the preparation classes she was a part of, or in the larger congregation. In that environment, she says, “I was like doing two things on two different tracks.” This description fits Wilcox’ pattern – “Separating Sexual and Religious Identities.”

The conflict between the separate identities came to a head for Sarah after she had been baptized into the Catholic Church, as the priest child abuse scandal broke. She recalls agreeing with the statement of Pope John Paul II that believers should be prepared to offer mercy to offending priests, but being brought up short by a subsequent pronouncement:

John Paul II had made a statement saying...that there might be people who were outside of salvation. Like, there would be people for whom there could be no salvation, and the groups of people that he suggested would be in that group [included]...gay and lesbian people who were in a relationship. All those things converged, perfect storm. And I just thought, I can’t do this. We had to have forgiveness [for priests who had abused children]...of course, everyone should be forgiven. And then to be told that there might be some people outside of salvation...It was just like my brain cracked in half. I was like, I can’t...this doesn’t...I don’t get it anymore...I started looking for a new church.

Joan, in her sixties, was raised in an intensely Catholic setting, but describes losing her faith while in her college years:

One thing that did happen was I completely lost my faith. From this, I believe, to this day, that faith is a gift. And I had it, and then I didn't...one day honestly I woke up and felt nothing about God. And I was really concerned about it. Because I had been playing guitar at mass, and all this other – had always been involved in extracurricular Catholic kind of stuff. So all of a sudden there was nothing.

At the same time, Joan was wrestling with feelings of attraction toward women. She first heard the word “lesbian” during a campaign for student body president in college, but found herself uncomfortable with it. “...I couldn't say ‘lesbian,’ even many years later, I'd say ‘gay woman.’ I couldn't bring myself...So that upset me. ‘Cause I didn't want that. I mean, I wanted to have a regular life...I knew that [if I was a lesbian]...I'd be thrown out of the church and despised.”

Her encounters with openly lesbian women did not clarify her identity:

I was involved in the National Organization for Women, and we met at their offices in the city, and to get to our meeting, we had to go through this lesbian meeting, and all of the women were like lumberjacks. I swear, very masculine, very big, very roughly hewed and dressed. Boots...So that scared the hell out of me. That was the kind of thing that just scared the hell out of me and I thought, “I'm not like that.” I thought that's what [lesbianism] was. I mean, I didn't have any definition of what it was...I think that wasn't who I was. So I just didn't know what I was. It's like, if that's what it is, and I'm not that, then what the hell am I?...The Gay Pride parade was I guess happening by then, it was half-naked guys in leather. In my sensible gray pumps, and my briefcase, I didn't think I would fit in.

To cope with her conflicted feelings about her sexual identity, Joan turned to alcohol:

“Cause that was the other aspect is, I was becoming more and more alcoholic by the day.

And that was why, because I couldn't face being gay. I could not face it, so I drank.” A

measure of acceptance for her sexual identity began to grow as Joan joined a 12-step

group and became sober. She chose a sponsor to whom she could reveal her lesbian

identity, “‘Cause I knew if I lied about it there, it was really not going to help me.”

After experiencing a call to the priesthood, Joan began to attend a local Episcopal church. Her spiritual growth continued until she became comfortable referring to her higher power as “God.” Joan’s experiences illustrate Wilcox’s pattern of “Dealing with Each Identity in Succession.” First Joan achieved a measure of peace with her sexual identity, and then she returned to organized religion to deal with her Christian identity.

Jennifer, in her thirties, described a reconciliation process that clearly fit the pattern of Coming Out in A Religious Community. Jennifer was raised in a progressive Episcopal Church, and came out while attending seminary. She described a positive change in her relationship with God at the time: “I felt fully alive and I felt this great washover of blessing, and it was really helpful being in the community that I was, being in the seminary community because very, quite literallyprobably 90% of the reaction I got was, congratulations!”

Phyllis, in her fifties, first had questions about her sexual identity when she began the ordination process in the Episcopal Church:

...it coincides with when another lesbian deacon started the process. Because reading – you know, [all the aspirants] read [each other’s] spiritual autobiographies – and again with her, coming out late...I think hearing more stories was probably what...another stirring that said, “Oh.” One [whispers], I could be gay. And two, it may not be too bad if I am.

Nevertheless, Phyllis struggled with what a lesbian sexual identity might mean for her life with her husband and children:

“Please God, let me know this isn’t true. I don’t want to lose my husband and the kids. I don’t know how I can handle this.” And then, I think it became, “God I don’t want this to be true, but if it is...” I think for God and I, it was...there was a time I was angry. How could this be true, how could you let this happen? ...It’s not just my life that’s going to be turned upside down. It’s theirs, and our family’s.

In time, Phyllis came out to the bishop of the diocese where she was serving a parish part-time while attending seminary. The bishop asked her to hold a special meeting with the congregation to let them know.

...the congregation was just, “What are we having this meeting for? What will Phyllis tell us?” My husband was there, a Canon from the diocese was there, because apparently, his first wife came out as gay...He was there to support my husband. And the bishop was there. So I shared my story about the journey, and how it was. Afterwards, people came up to me and said, “Oh, Phyllis, being gay is nothing. We thought you had cancer and were dying.” ...the majority of people said, “You’re still Phyllis.”

Phyllis’ experience of coming out in a supportive church was one of relief and joy:

It was the next day, as I’m driving to work, and I pull into the drive to go to the church, and it was just like a load had been lifted off. I think there was a Christian song on the radio about flying. I felt like I was flying, like I was on top of the world, like I could fly. Just the biggest burden had been lifted. Because now, I didn’t have to hide it anymore...everyone in my life who needed to know, now knew. And I knew how they felt about it.

Age and length of time in ministry did not seem to play a crucial role in determining which reconciliation pattern participants exhibited. The seven who fit into the “Connecting Religion and LGBT Identity” category varied in age from forties to seventies, and from four to fifty-four years of ministry. All in this category, however, were raised in the church, and all, of course, became a part of the Episcopal Church at some point in their spiritual journeys. Age is likely one factor in the case of Jennifer, who was raised in a progressive Episcopal congregation. In her thirties, she was much more likely to have had access to this type of church than her colleagues in their sixties and seventies.

FINDINGS: RESOURCES FOR RECONCILIATION

Six types of resources were described by participants as helpful to the process of integrating their sexual and religious identities: mentors; learning resources; liberal religious communities; faith; and the LGBT community, and secular resources. Mentors played a role in eleven of the fourteen participants' reconciliation processes. One type of mentor was a pastor or priest who helped with the process of understanding the dual identities of gay/lesbian and Christian. Harry, in his seventies, was able to talk through this issue with the priest of a neighboring Episcopal parish, as well as a religious friend: "I had a friend who was a monk who was gay himself...he became kind of my spiritual director. He helped me a great deal just coming to grips with [reconciling gay and religious identities], because obviously that question came up." Meryl's narrative included a Roman Catholic nun involved in ministry with gays:

A friend of mine, a nun, who was a teaching sister...and a priest were involved at this new ministry. She was – she's still a religious – she was helpful to gays trying to reconcile, live within the church and still feel like they're wanted human beings. And [Pope] Benedict...silenced her. The priest...gave up after all those years of ministry, said, "Ok, I can't afford it," and she would not be silenced. And [she] had to leave community and was actually taken in by an order in another state, so we, my partner and I went to the transfer of vows to the new order.

Another type of mentor or role model mentioned by Joel was a college professor who "took LGBT students under his wing, in a totally appropriate way, just to kind of encourage us. He'd have us all over and make dinner at his house, and that sort of thing...the kind of being gay and Christian..I don't know that we discussed it explicitly, it was just more, "this is what is normal." Paul was greatly assisted in his reconciliation process by meeting an Episcopal priest during his college years. The priest's church hosted pitch-in dinners for college students, and the priest led discussions on faith issues

and encouraged the students to ask questions. Impressed by the priest's openness and honesty, Paul sought him out to discuss the issue of sexual identity:

...I had a conference with this Father John...I went to see him. It was like when Luther discovered Romans 1:18, "The just shall live by faith," and his eyes were opened. I told Father John my struggles, and he said, "So you're gay." He says, "What's your ethnic background?" I said, "Well, I'm German." He goes, "Okay, so you're German. That's who your forebears are. Your sexual identity is that of a gay man. Why would you think God makes garbage? God doesn't make garbage. God created you." And I was like, "I never heard this before." He said, "Wouldn't you be living a lie if you married a woman and tried to have children and you ended up being divorced?" I'm like, "Isn't that sinful?" He goes, "Why is it sinful? If you're being true to who you are..."...So I remember getting a little weepy, and he was such a good pastor, he said, "What are you doing tonight?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Why don't you hang around? My wife will be having dinner."

Reflecting on the consequences of this conversation, Paul said, "It was kind of liberating-
- I think a couple of months, I began to really feel the guilt melting away."

Learning resources about homosexuality and/or religion proved helpful for seven participants. Publications from a pro-LGBT group called Evangelicals Concerned was cited as "a lifesaver" by Bill, in his sixties:

Well, I wasn't really that involved – there was no group – it's just that the publications helped me. I think I've been blessed by having a good intellect, and I was able to sift through all of that...it identified what are commonly called the "clobber passages." And then reinterpreted them, helped me get the cultural background that was part of all of that, and helped me see that sexuality was approached differently, and masculinity and femininity. It's not comparable...I recognize now, in more broad terms about the Bible and how we use it today, it's like different cultures, different time periods, different languages. You can't just read the Bible and say, "this is what it is."

Learning resources also included historical-critical Bible study of "anti-gay" passages.

Nathan described Bible study as particularly important:

[A gay pastor friend] and I started going to an MCC Church on Sunday nights in a nearby town...There were two lesbians there and they did a

study on homosexuality in the Bible...[It] began to help me figure out that the important thing in those passages as I read them is loving relationship. You can take a look at every one of those Bible passages in historical context...Once I put those texts in context and don't just look at them with tunnel vision, I began to realize that the God of my understanding and that the Bible...[do] not condemn me to death just because of the feelings I have. That was a really big transition for me to make.

Other participants cited additional types of classes. Ron, in his seventies, mentioned a gay studies class at a local Free University, and Joel described a social justice-focused class in college as being helpful in reframing understanding of gay and lesbian persons and identities.

Participants' personal spirituality or relationship with God played a major role in the reconciliation process for eight participants. The connection the participants perceived with God allowed them to retain their faith despite challenges from conservative religion as they experienced their self-identification and eventual coming out as gay or lesbian. Jennifer's upbringing in a progressive Episcopal Church helped her hold onto her beliefs at a conservative Protestant college:

So at college, they had a community covenant wherein they said being homosexual wasn't sinful but in this community you will sign a covenant that any act of homosexuality is against our community covenant, it is against the promise that we're making in community...I didn't physically sign the community covenant, they said that I signed it by being a student there and accepting that I was going to be a student there, but I didn't literally sign it, I refused when they said we're going to do this. So I was able to maintain my story and uphold my story in the midst of this.

Kevin cited his early religious training in the Lutheran church as something that allowed his faith to continue unassailed through his coming out process:

No, I never had that conflict that other people really struggle with. We had...going back to confirmation class, we were taught historical critical, an introduction into that way of understanding scripture and stuff...It helped because I could understand those passages in context...The clobber

passages, they call them, like Leviticus and Romans, and that kind of stuff. The few mentions there are about homosexuality. I mean, it was just very clear to me that I knew how to understand those passages – it had nothing to do with my faith. I grew up in a style of Lutheranism that was very much focused on love, and not on judgment. All of these pieces just sort of smoothed my way. It was never a faith issue for me.

Liberal religious communities also featured prominently in reconciliation narratives. Thirteen of fourteen participants' narratives mentioned an upbringing in a progressive, pro-LGBT church, participation in a progressive congregation as an adult, and/or attending a progressive seminary. In addition to participating in a Bible Study at an MCC Church as described above, Nathan began attending a Church of the Brethren at the invitation of the church's gay pastor, and became an active member, starting a music program and meeting other gay members. After coming out, Meryl left the Roman Catholic Church where she had been an active member, knowing she was no longer welcome. She found refuge in a local Catholic religious community: "I started going to the monastery then. I have more of a contemplative bend to me. They knew, and they were cool. There were fine with it." And although his seminary was not itself liberal, Harry reported that meeting other gay seminarians there reassured him that he was "not alone." For Phyllis, beginning the exploratory process for ordination in her diocese and attending seminary was the first opportunity she had to meet gay and lesbian people:

I really was not around any gay or lesbian people. No one at my church. But when I started the process, another person and I were in a couple classes together, and at that time...I think that's when I first really encountered being among gay and lesbian people, in a sense of having a conversation...So then going up to seminary and seeing people living those lives, and not being ridiculed, being accepted for who they were. I remember one student, she was doing the same thing as me, finishing up her degree. She and her partner, I don't know how long they'd been together, but she was someone I felt, "I need to talk to her about this." And I remember saying to her, "Could I talk to you a bit about ...I don't know how to explain this, but I'm questioning whether I'm gay or not."

The wider LGBT community provided models of religious gay and lesbian persons and communities for participants, and was a part of ten participants' experiences. Ron became a part of a group for gay persons who were a part of various churches called Fellowship. The lack of a reference community played a part in Nathan's identity reconciliation struggles: "I was having physical feelings of attractiveness to other men, sexual feelings...I suppose that I didn't have any sort of context, like I do now...[the community of gay and lesbian friends] didn't exist in my life when I was 19 and 20...That was very isolating for me, I would say..." After moving across the country to a large metropolitan area, Nathan began to connect:

I lived in [a large gay community], I didn't know it at the time. I'm out jogging...and I run into this festival, which is the gay pride festival. I thought, "This is unbelievable." I met some other gay people there and things began to happen, in terms of meeting friends and connecting with people.

Bill described a gradual coming to terms with his gay identity, helped along by connecting with a religious gay community: "I was coming to terms with being comfortable, started understanding the Bible differently, I started sensing community within the gay context, worship within the gay context. And so I just gradually started accepting it." Bill also mentioned participating in Dignity, a Catholic pro-LGBT organization. Roger was married to a woman for many years and had been open with her about his "tendency toward homosexuality." At one point in their marriage, she suggested that he attend a support group in their city for gay married men. Roger attended for a short while as part of the negotiations between him and his wife trying to come to terms with sexual intimacy in their marriage.

Finally, four participants named secular resources such as counseling therapy and twelve-step groups that were helpful in their identity reconciliation process. Phyllis turned to her therapist for help in processing the life changes she faced in light of her lesbian identity:

...I'd been seeing a therapist before I went away [to seminary]...so started talking to her about it...I knew that was one person I could trust. She'd gotten me through a lot...She would not judge...She already knew a lot of the background. I was, "I don't know...I think I might be gay." I think a lot of me didn't want to be. I was happily married, and had three wonderful kids. If this is true, then what does that do?

Joan's struggle with accepting her lesbian identity led to alcoholism. After achieving sobriety in a rehabilitation program, Joan began attending a 12-step group:

I went to [a meeting]. I had no God...There was this honesty happening there that I'd never heard anywhere in my life before...I thought probably I needed to be there, but I really didn't believe I was an alcoholic...But I stayed. Because I figured I could always leave. Long long story, I did stay, and I didn't speak to anybody for quite a long time. I sat there. And then I went to another meeting, another meeting and started to go to a couple more meetings. There's a lot of stories and involvement and growth and all of that.

It is not surprising that one of the resources most frequently mentioned by participants was a pastor, priest, or role model. Twelve of the participants have been active members of Churches all their lives, and could be expected to encounter, or turn to, religious leaders as mentors. It is somewhat unusual that many of the participants found *progressive* religious leaders, often in the Episcopal Church, in many cases during the time before official Church policy or doctrine accepted homosexual persons as full members or permitted their ordination. As will be demonstrated below, study participants often came to provide just such mentoring for other gay and lesbian Christians.

The common mention of learning resources as helpful would also be expected among Episcopal clergy, who serve one of the most highly educated denominations in the U.S. (PewResearch 2016b). Although not all participants were part of an Episcopal congregation at the time they were integrating their sexual and religious identities, they have all attained a Master's Degree or higher. Perhaps education level and emphasis was part of the eventual appeal of the Episcopal denomination.

Liberal religious communities also played a distinct role for participants, particularly Episcopal parishes. However, these communities were not always part of progressive denominations, such as the progressive Roman Catholic parish where Sarah was baptized, and the religious community where Meryl worshiped. Other such congregations were part of denominations that had taken a positive stance toward homosexuality, such as the MCC congregation and Church of the Brethren congregation that were helpful to Nathan.

FINDINGS: COMBINING GAY OR LESBIAN AND CLERGY IDENTITIES

Challenges

Participants' experiences and reflections on combining their gay or lesbian identity with a clergy identity were of four types: first, the difficulties of undertaking a social life as a gay or lesbian clergy; second, concerns over the worthiness or acceptableness of a gay or lesbian person seeking ordination; third, the search for a denomination that would ordain gay or lesbian clergy; and four, concerns about finding employment as a lesbian priest.

Three clergy discussed their experiences with creating a meaningful social life as a gay or lesbian priest; two of these began their ordained ministry in the closet. Harry described a time of growing into his identity as a gay man while simultaneously learning how to be a priest.

It was a time of actually learning how to be who I was, and also learning how to – what other people learn quite a bit earlier...It was very difficult. Particularly in my first parish where my housing was actually part of the church complex. I was on the property all the time...it was very constraining. That was probably okay, kept me out of trouble.

In addition to his housing situation, Harry's early ministry was conducted in small towns, where the opportunity to interact with a gay community was quite limited. Further, his low salary meant he didn't have a lot of resources available to travel to a larger city.

...I was in a small town and so I had friends in the city. Any opportunity to do things – I developed a support group in the city...But it was very difficult for me because I had so little money...And actually I made a lot of friends through the church because I was also, as much as I could afford it, sometimes I got involved in [diocesan] committees [that met in a large city] so my mileage was paid.

Paul also began his ordained ministry in the closet, although his first parish was in a large metropolitan area. This made it possible for him to "cautiously" visit gay bars and date: "I was very cautious, which is probably why I never came down with AIDS...[cautious

about] who I dated, and the kind of activities – I was very careful.” Although Paul was not “out” as a gay man in his professional life, he was open about being a priest when he met potential dates. This was not always a positive:

You did it [dating] very much on the side. Half the time, when the guy found out you were a priest, they were like, “Ah, shit, no. I’m sorry, I can’t deal with this.” And then you’d have to say, “I’m not a Roman Catholic priest.” But gay men immediately [scoffs] would be like, “Oh, no, I can’t deal with this.” ...I didn’t want to lie about who I was, but I didn’t advertise it either. I’d go to a bar in jeans and a turtle neck or jacket or something like that.

Jennifer began her ministry with an openly lesbian identity. She suspected that dating as a priest might be difficult, and her experience bore that out: “I was very overwhelmed about the prospect of dating, while I’m a priest, and as I have experienced it, it’s been terrible.” Jennifer’s concerns focused on how she could act as a “leader of relationships” within her congregation while being a single person, possibly increasing parishioner’s perception of her as “young and inexperienced.” Jennifer’s ministry setting is in a medium-sized metropolitan area with a relatively small Episcopal population. This means that the potential for overlap between a suitable dating pool and the pool of Episcopal congregants is substantial, causing a conflict for her:

...I felt really vulnerable dating because, where do I go, one...there’s only one gay bar and...it is a little bit sleazy...So do I go on Tinder and risk being seen by someone? I tried, the options are terrible...I know that there are people in a couple of local parishes who are dating, who are women who are dating. People that really need a priest, more than they need a girlfriend as I can pretty quickly deduce, or the one person I dated very, very briefly was more in the category of needing a priest than a girlfriend. She just really wanted to be Episcopalian and she really wanted to come to my church and I’m like, “No. You can’t do that”...I need a partner. I don’t want to be a priest to my partner.

These participants’ difficulties in meeting their socialization needs may not be unique to gay and lesbian clergy; it’s likely that single heterosexual clergy face the challenge of

maintaining boundaries between personal and professional identities (part of the “stained glass fishbowl” phenomenon”), as well as encounter potential romantic partners who shy away from involvement with a representative of organized religion. However, gay and lesbian clergy face an intensification of these challenges. First, as with Harry and Paul, if they are not “out” in their professional setting, extra caution is necessary to avoid possible loss of their positions; second, in most ministry settings, the local gay or lesbian population is relatively small, making the opportunity to find a good match less likely, and increasing the chance of overlap between potential partners and congregants.

A second issue found at the intersection of participants’ sexual and clergy identities was personal concern over whether gay and lesbian persons were worthy or acceptable candidates for ordination. Four of fourteen participants articulated these concerns. Nathan found himself addressing this type of question during his discernment process for Episcopal ordination: “Some of the questions I was asking are, and I started into this at age 54, ‘Am I too old? Am I too gay?’” One cause of the latter question was the very conservative religious beliefs of his mother, as well as a conservative parishioner at the Episcopal church he was attending. However, his doubts also encompassed a potential congregation’s perception of his suitability for the priesthood:

I have been single for a very long time, so I worried whether I was going to be able to find a parish that wanted somebody who was openly gay and who was single. ‘What’s wrong with him?’ I can imagine them asking, “Why doesn’t he have a wife? If he doesn’t have a wife, why doesn’t he have a partner? If he doesn’t have a partner, why isn’t he looking? What’s wrong with him?”

Roger reached the conclusion that being gay was acceptable to God while attending a progressive seminary. He had not yet fully accepted his own gay identity at this point, and also still had questions about the ordination of gay persons:

I think the main reason I didn't want to be ordained was 'cause I still wasn't sure about my personal life...Even if I was celibate. I thought you needed to know what family life was like...I'm not sure I was ready to say it was okay to be ordained, and be gay, because I still thought you know, you need to be sort of, above question, it would be too controversial.

Joan was attending seminary in 2003, when major conflict broke out in the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican communion over the elevation of an openly gay and partnered Episcopal priest, Gene Robinson, to the seat of Bishop of New Hampshire. She relates the personal effect of the conflict: "...I thought I was going to be thrown out of the seminary...There was that much conflict. 30% of my class was gay, so logically I knew that that was unlikely, but it still seemed really likely. Especially with my self-hate, it's like "the other shoe's gonna [drop]." While heterosexual candidates for ordination may certainly experience doubts about their call to vocational ministry, gay and lesbian candidates may need to process very specific, negative religious and social messages about their suitability for ordination, above and beyond reconciling their sexual and Christian identities as lay persons.

A third type of data identified featured concerns of participants who had perceived a call to ministry but were not aware of a denomination that might ordain a gay or lesbian person. Three participants expressed these questions as part of their narratives, and interestingly, two of them turned to the internet to answer their question. Sarah experienced her call to ministry during a time of turmoil in her life. She was negotiating a conflicted personal relationship, searching for clarity on the issue of her vocation, and struggling with statements of the Roman Catholic hierarchy on the priest child-abuse scandal as a newly baptized Roman Catholic. One Sunday a guest priest presided at mass:

..I was sitting in mass, it was summer, beautiful...we had a guest priest who was studying at a university in the city...He came in during the

procession, he was wearing Birkenstocks and a green chasuble [a long priestly vestment]. And as he walked past...I really felt, I felt the chasuble around my ankles. I just felt that, like I'm wearing the garment, I'm wearing the priestly garment...It was just like a moment, you know? But it was so intense. And I was like, I'm supposed to be doing that.

Shortly after this experience, Sara left the Roman Catholic church. In an effort to respond to the perceived call to ordained ministry, Sara began a search:

I literally googled "lesbian/Eucharist/priest" for my city. I don't remember what order they were in, but I was like, if I really am called to be a priest...I knew I needed the Eucharist. That had become the center of my faith...And then, who doesn't hate the gays, that was my second question, which denominations are okay with gay people? Are there any where those things cross? And who ordained women? Women, gay, Eucharist.

Joan also found herself in the position of experiencing a call to ministry while she was not a part of any particular denomination. "So I looked up online 'woman priest,' I had no idea. So I looked online, and it said the Episcopal Church had woman priests." Joan went to the local Episcopal church and spoke with a priest, sharing that she was a lesbian. "[The priest's response was] none. It was like, 'Okay, isn't everybody?'" Joel had been attracted to religion and worship since childhood. But it was not until he experienced worship at an Episcopal church during college that he began to consider the possibility of ordination:

First, there was a female priest who was there, and so that was the first time I'd ever seen a female pastor...All of a sudden, kind of this refuge was created, out of nothing for me, in the life and ministry of this church. And, to kind of walk in and have that experience, to see a woman behind the altar, I started thinking, 'I could do this.' She wasn't one of the initial women ordained, but she was in that first wave of ordained clergy. So she'd talked a lot about her own struggle to kind of be a visible reminder of God to others through her vocation. In hearing her vocational story, I could see kind of a lot of parallels to mine...everyone that I had considered before to be, or that I had heard from the church before, my Presbyterian church, to be either a sinner or not eligible, was suddenly eligible.

The fourth issue encountered by participants when considering the intersection of their clergy and gay or lesbian identities was a concern over finding employment. Both participants who expressed this concern were women. Phyllis came out as lesbian to the congregation she served during seminary:

[I knew] I was fine at my church, but if I was to go somewhere else and I was out, could I get a job somewhere else? That was the other question, as a woman, did we have any [lesbian priests in the diocese]? I don't think there were any gay women clergy at that time...Plenty of [gay] men, a number of men...You know, I already had one strike against me in some places for being female...The thought of okay, I come out, I try to get a job, I'm divorced, just the whole thing.

Jennifer was confident of her ability to find work: "I'm an educated person, I have a job that has prospects." However, she acknowledged that it would be difficult to combine her love of international travel with her identity as a lesbian priest: "Those options aren't there for me. Not yet, they're slowly...I mean, I could go to Canada. Brazil I'm sure will be along in a bit. But even in England, the options aren't there for me..." In addition, Jennifer knows that her options for living as a celibate woman to take a ministry position in another country clash with another call in her life – to be a mother. "I feel called to be a mother with a capital M, and a lower case m. A mother as well as a mommy, so when that comes that'll be much more of a visible sign of my sexuality that will not be able to be ignored. But that too, it's a choice. It's a choice as well as a calling, so when I hold them together, that's something that's always been important for me." While LGBT lay persons in the U.S. and in other countries can face sexual-orientation discrimination in the workplace, their opportunities for work may be greater because in many fields their

social or personal lives would not intersect with the workplace to as great an extent as those of clergy do.

Sexual Identity as a Gift for Ministry

In addition to identifying challenges and concerns about combining a gay or lesbian sexual identity with their identity as ordained clergy, participants also described ways that they felt their gay or lesbian identity was a boon to their ministry. These benefits fell into two basic categories: first, an awareness and experience of social dynamics of power and powerlessness; and second, strengthening their pastoral work with parish members. Five of the participants felt that being gay or lesbian gave them a heightened understanding of the social dynamics of power and disenfranchisement. Harry explained how this understanding connected with the Christian faith:

It seems we've gotten to the place where being gay [clergy] is almost a non-issue in the church. That, I think, is a very healthy thing, because it brings to positions of responsibility people that understand the issues of power...these are people who know what it is to be isolated by social structure, to be disenfranchised. In my mind, this is the key issue of being Christian, ultimately...To understand at a gut level what it means to be disenfranchised. Because that's the ministry ultimately, is about inclusiveness, and reaching out to the poor. If we use poor as a broader category, to say those who have been harmed by inappropriate social isolation.

Kevin felt that, as a white male, and therefore privileged in many ways, his gay identity allowed him to experience being part of what the Bible calls "the meek of the earth":

...the way I've thought about it is, I'm a white male. There's a lot of privilege that comes with whiteness and maleness. And so being gay strips you of that in one sense, in terms of culturally, particularly in a lot of people's eyes...It gives you a sense of being, theologically, part of the meek of the earth in the sense that you're not part of the powerful...I can't claim the same place of power that my normal whiteness and maleness might automatically assume to be granted to me.

Ron found that although he faced many difficult experiences when he was outed by members of the congregation he was serving, ultimately coming out was an experience of liberation:

I do think that the coming out process is, by definition, a liberating thing, and therefore fits with the gospel that is liberating...It's really saying the same thing, there's a freedom involved, if you no longer have to hide that, then you're free...For example, I think of St. Paul, essentially saying, "What more can they do to me? They've stoned me, they've put me in prison. If they stone me, I just share in the sufferings of Jesus, and if they put me in prison, they just give me time to write to you. Anything that happens to me cannot hurt me. Because I'm free." There's something similar that happens when you come out...[you are free from] partly shame, and the "what will people think" thing. Freedom from financial worry. If you come out and have lost a job, what more can they do to you?

Six participants narrated ways that their pastoral ministry with parish members was strengthened or further enabled by their experience and identity as gay or lesbian. Seth pointed out that as a gay priest, he was able to more readily identify with the particular struggles of LGBT congregants: "...it's more easy for us to identify with people who struggle. It's more easy for us to identify with other LGBT persons in our pews, the struggle day in and day out that your white Anglo-Saxon married couples don't have to deal with, you know." Bill identified the conflict between religious identity and social identity experienced by some LGBT people as a particular struggle he could identify with:

I think what I'm always alert to is the extent to which [LGBT people] are being marginalized, or the extent to which they bifurcate themselves. You know, they're this person here and they're that person there, and like, these two lives connect!..It's like, there are gay folks in the congregation, but you never hear about them dating, you don't hear about that. They're just there and it's like, you have this life over there and this life over here, and they don't touch.

Paul, who was forced to resign from a parish when the vestry learned of his gay identity, echoed this idea of connecting with identity struggles of LGBT parishioners and also said that being gay has given him a greater ability to accept people as they are:

Even before I was forced out...and then when I came to grips with my identity publicly, and feeling comfortable about that...it helped me to become more understanding and pastoral, to understand people who are struggling with their own identity. It makes me a better pastor...I can walk in someone else's shoes, because I may not have walked in their specific shoes, but I empathize. So I think my sexual orientation, with all that goes with it, helped me to be a more accepting person all the way around.

A greater understanding of acceptance assisted Paul in his parish ministry; Kevin, currently working as a therapist, finds this sense of acceptance important as well:

...I work as a therapist right now,...as I've worked through my issues as I've grown into various realities, I'm far more accepting. It's like I don't need to judge people. You meet them where they're at...in some sense, when you begin to be comfortable with yourself, and are authentically who you are, then you can engage people for who they are.

Nathan found that his experience becoming comfortable with both his gay and Christian identities served him well leading a parish through discussions of their identity as a congregation:

Strangely enough, the very thing I thought was going to be a liability, my orientation, has been a resource for the diocese and for me. Could this have happened in 1975, when I was first afraid I was gay? That's how I phrased it, no, it would never have occurred to me, never...I have come to regard my comfort with who I am...as a critical skillset to helping the parish get back on track and growing, I really have, and so did the search committee...What I thought would be an impediment, has turned out to be an asset...

Sarah felt that being a lesbian priest allowed congregants to share with her more frankly about their sex lives:

One of the things I think that being gay allows is that people are real with me about their sex lives. Which I don't think people are with pastors...It

means people really tell me what's happening in their lives. Whether that's relational, like, "We're struggling," or they're struggling with pornography...I think because people assume if you're gay that it's all about sex, even though of course sexual orientation is more about...affectional orientation. It just means, I always say this to couples I'm counseling pre-maritally. When you're gay, you have to make it all up...it's not obvious what you're gonna do...and so it is much more foregrounded. I think people assume that I have that foregrounding, and therefore will not be surprised...

FINDINGS: RELIGIOUS AGENCY OF GAY AND LESBIAN CLERGY IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Study participants demonstrated multiple forms of religious agency within the Episcopal Church. Five forms of agency fell into Leming's (2007) "Gaining Voice" category of agency; seven forms of agency fit the "Making Space" category; and three forms fell into the "Flexible Alignment" category of agency.

Gaining Voice

Under the "Gaining Voice" category were actions of coming out; telling the story of gay or lesbian persons; political and public advocacy; understanding the call to ministry as, in part, a call to minister with and to gays and lesbians and issues faced by these persons within the church and society; and confronting talk.

Coming Out

Eight of the fourteen participants reported coming out in their ministry settings, an action that gained voice for clergy participants by claiming the right to speak and be heard as a gay or lesbian person. Clergy in the study who were ordained and ministered beginning in the 1960's and 70's did not choose the time of coming out, instead being "outed" by hostile senior clergy or vestry members. Ron was serving in a large urban parish where the senior priest had been ill for sometime, leaving Ron to take up the bulk of the administrative and pastoral care tasks. A member of the parish became aware of Ron's sexual identity through some writing he had done in a newsletter published by an Episcopal LGBT support group, and notified the senior priest.

So the rector asked me if I was gay, and I said, "yes." And then, he essentially said, "you can't stay around. But I need to tell the vestry." I said, "Well, I'll tell the vestry." So at the next vestry meeting, which was, very close in time. I was there. He asked me the question, and I said "yes." And then I left the room.

Ron's decision to acknowledge his sexual identity to the rector, and to reveal it in person to the vestry, rather than allow the rector to speak about and for him to the lay leaders of the congregation, provided an opportunity for these people to hear the voice of a familiar priest in an additional way – as the voice of a gay clergy person.

Paul was the rector of a congregation in a West Coast parish, serving “in the closet,” when the diocese’s bishop called on his parishes to participate in the local Gay Pride parade as a sign of Episcopal support of gay and lesbian persons. Paul’s vestry was not supportive of the idea. After a contentious discussion, he informed them that he was going to participate in the parade, as the bishop had requested. Shortly after the parade, vestry members began to spread rumors about Paul:

One guy started a nasty rumor and showed up at my house saying, “We have evidence that you were in drag at the gay pride parade.” And I said, “What?”...I said, “Evidence from what?” It was a lie. “We were told that you’ve got drug dealers coming in the house, and that you’re doing cocaine.” I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or be angry...It was a smear campaign...I had a parishioner who was sympathetic to me, who was a cop, and he arranged for me to take a lie detector test...That’s what it had come to. [One of the questions was] “Are you gay?” I said, “Yes, I am. Are you happy now?”

By coming out during the polygraph test, Paul claimed his identity with as much dignity as possible in the hostile setting, and provided an opportunity for parish members to witness this claim and wrestle with its meaning. Paul reflects, “...I was the symptom by which people had to deal with their own bigotry and prejudice.” Interestingly, Paul’s painful experience of being “outed” in this parish led to more opportunities for gay and lesbian clergy to be heard in his diocese. Paul reports that clergy colleagues from that time have shared that “Unfortunately, you were the focal point and sacrificial victim which led to the diocese totally revamping its non-discrimination policy in terms of

hiring clergy. But you were the unfortunate victim because you were the first to come out.”

Clergy who were ordained in 1996 and later were able to choose when to identify as gay or lesbian to their congregations. Joel made the decision after his first ministry position to leave the diocese where he was required to serve in the closet, moving to a diocese where he could serve as an openly gay priest, starting with the interview process: “I was clear and out from the very beginning, at the advice of this seminary professor. She said, ‘Once you make the switch, you can’t go back into the closet, and so just be out and open.’” Joan and Nathan also reported the importance to them of being open about their sexual identities in ministry settings. Meryl served an internship in her parish while hiding her orientation at the request of the parish rector. When she learned that the vestry wanted to call her as their deacon, she insisted that she would accept only if the vestry and congregation knew she was lesbian and if they would welcome her wife as part of the congregation.

Several of the clergy participants emphasized the importance of being open and honest about their sexual identities. They held authenticity and integrity as very important facets of their clergy identities and of their relationships with parish members. Joel describes the role of priest as “being a vessel of God’s truth:” “...If the essence of a priest or a deacon, or even a layperson for that matter, is really to be a vessel for God’s truth and a vessel for the Gospel, it seems pretty phony to not even be able to be yourself. Here I’m supposed to be a truth-teller about God’s love for everyone.” Nathan emphasizes the importance of integrity for a priest:

To be authentic to myself...is very important when you’re preaching. If you’re coming [to worship] and [the priest] stands up and says something

that doesn't fit with who she is, your alarm is going to go off if you can tell she's not being true to who she is. In my own mind, I have to be true to myself and also be true to scripture."

Telling Stories of LGBT People

Seven of fourteen study participants reported instances of telling the stories of gays and lesbians in their roles as gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy. Bill, an ordained deacon, related his plans to hold a congregational forum about LGBT issues: "...I wanted...our own LGBT folks in our parish to share why it was important, how the parish was welcoming, what more it might do, why it was important, to be there. To help the larger congregation to hear these stories." By sponsoring such a forum, Bill was not only empowering the LGBT members to gain voice in telling their stories, but also empowering the larger congregation to see the church's place in those stories. By virtue of their role as ordained Episcopal clergy, some study participants gained voice for gay and lesbian persons within the Christian Church by telling their own stories to groups outside the church. Jennifer works with a queer youth support group in the community, as well as a young adult group that includes people who have aged out of the youth group:

I've not ever worked with a queer youth population other than what I have here and many have been very, very hurt by the church. Most if not all have encountered vicious Christianity...it's just another place where I go, and I'm very open in that community about who I am and what I do...One guy [in the young adult group]...he's like, "You know, I'm one of those fringe people that you talk about. But here you are in front of me and I just told my friends, 'You know what I'm talking with a...lesbian Episcopal priest right now. Do you know that such a thing exists?'"

By telling her story as an ordained lesbian priest, Jennifer welcomes other LGBT persons to bring their stories to the Episcopal Church.

Political and Public Advocacy

Five of the fourteen participants showed religious agency by engaging in political and public advocacy for LGBT persons and issues in their role as Episcopal Clergy. Seth's advocacy has taken several forms. He leads members of his congregation in participating in the local Gay Pride Parade each year, and took on the role of Faith Leader for a state-wide movement working for LGBT marriage and civil rights. In addition, "I testified in a summer session of the state legislature. They were doing a 'due diligence,' if you will, for the legislative session to see if there needed to be LGBT legislation brought up this year." Ron also reported speaking to the state legislature regarding LGBT issues, and Meryl worked with the pro-LGBT group Lambda Legal. Phyllis was invited to a yearly public event sponsored by another denomination and gradually found herself speaking out:

[The event] is on the courthouse steps in another town...it's to recognize and accept gay, lesbian, and transgender people. Of course, we're talking a conservative town...So the first year I went, in my collar, just to be there...Last year they asked if I would speak. I was a little braver that time. So I had my collar on, and I spoke about briefly, not very long, about living as God created us to be...

These clergy employed the authority inherent in their ordination as representatives of the Episcopal Church to give voice to the concerns of gay and lesbian persons in their communities.

Called to Minister with and to Gays and Lesbians

Four participants felt that gaining voice for gay and lesbian persons was part of their call to ordained ministry. Both Seth and Phyllis, quoted above, reported this sense of being called by God to minister, in part, to gay and lesbian persons and their issues. Seth reflected, "I mean, I never would have thought...I would be a voice of advocacy for

myself and for others like me. But being, having been given a platform, and also, I think it's part of my call, to create a different narrative for people that are being pushed to the margins." Phyllis says, "...I want to be more active in the LGBT community...Because I still think that's part of what God called me to be out in this town and this county. But I haven't quite found the right...and I figure God will show me that." Harry ministered during the time when anti-homosexual activist Anita Bryant was fomenting judgment and rejection of gays and lesbians in society. He interpreted issues of gay and lesbian rights in the light of participating in the Civil Rights movement during seminary:

I had to say I think I felt that there was a social issue here [gay and lesbian rights]. I had to make a statement about it. At least that was important to my understanding of what my calling was...For social issues and where there was inappropriate discrimination...I thought that needed to be confronted. While in seminary, I spent a whole summer with Jesse Jackson at the Chicago Urban League, where we dealt with the black issues following the death of Martin Luther King. This was really the same thing. This was a role that the church needed to play, and therefore I needed to [get] behind it.

Confronting Talk

Three clergy made the decision to directly confront persons about experiences of persecution, oppression, and discomfort connected to their sexual identities. These confrontations required the other party to recognize and acknowledge the experiences and needs of gay and lesbian clergy. Ron, who was "outed" by a parishioner and subsequently fired by the senior priest of the congregation, experienced further ill-treatment from lay leaders of the church even after he left his position:

...a couple of people in the parish, one before he knew what was going on, knew I was leaving, had offered me a job, which then evaporated when he found out. I mean, a secular job. Also when I moved in with my present partner and we tried to rent an apartment, the management company for the apartment was run by somebody in the parish and would not rent to us.

In response to these events, Ron turned to the bishop of the diocese. “I did call the bishop and, I didn’t talk to him, I yelled at him. And essentially told him to get his Episcopalians off my back.” Although the bishop was new to the diocese and could offer little in practical assistance, Ron’s confrontation with him asserted that his sexual identity did not justify persecution by his former parish. Sarah experienced conflict over clergy sexual identity as she attended seminary. Gene Robinson was ordained as the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church during her study, which intensified and brought the conflict into the open.

...no one attacked me or anything. But we were having a series of conversations around communion, and certainly I had to sit in rooms with people who said that gays and lesbians should not be ordained...It is amazing how much that can pierce you, to know that in your own fold, people you’re going to seminary with actually think that you are not valid to be a priest...I’m not in love with conflict. It just felt like I was the cause of conflict...I went to the dean at some point, because he was going to host conversations with the conservative students who felt so oppressed because the church was doing these things. And I went to him and I said, “You can’t have this conversation just with the conservative students. You have to have it with all of us...And, I said, “You have to address that these folks, the gay and lesbian folks who basically are being talked about as a problem all the time...”

Sarah’s conversation with the dean gained voice for the gay and lesbian seminarians alongside the voice of the conservative students. Meryl verbalized her experience serving in the closet during her internship in a reflection she wrote for the diocesan Commission on Ministry. While she did not feel or portray herself as oppressed in the ministry setting, she nonetheless wrote that she would be more comfortable and more effective in the role of Deacon if she were to serve openly. In this way, Meryl advocated for her needs as a lesbian clergy person.

Making Space

Seven types of religious agency exhibited by gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy fit Leming's (2007) category of "Making Space": serving as openly lesbian or gay clergy in the Episcopal Church; building relationships with anti-LGBT persons and groups; counseling and talking with groups and people in the church about LGBT issues; "making a way" in ministry settings by balancing ministry tasks and identity advocacy; serving as openly lesbian or gay Episcopal clergy in external settings; forming and supporting Christian LGBT advocacy groups; and using words and symbols on church signage to communicate the pro-LGBT stance of their congregations.

Serving as Openly Gay and Lesbian Clergy within the Episcopal Church

As discussed above under strategies of "Gaining Voice," some gay and lesbian clergy chose or were forced to come out in the context of the Episcopal Church, revealing their sexual identity. Participants also described the importance of ongoing ministry as an openly gay or lesbian person. In the classic understanding of priesthood, an ordained person represents God to church members and the community; they also represent church members and the community to God. In this way, if an ordained person is openly gay or lesbian, this communicates both God's acceptance of gay and lesbian persons as well as gay and lesbian persons' acceptableness to God. In the context of the Christian faith, where sexual minorities have long been (and still are, in many cases), explicitly portrayed as unacceptable to God and to Christians, openly gay and lesbian clergy create a spiritual space of acceptance and worth in the Episcopal Church for LGBT persons.

In the Episcopal tradition, one of the physical spaces most closely connected with God/Christ and spiritual authority is the sanctuary altar. The celebration of the ritual of

the Eucharist (communion) takes place at the altar, and in order to fill the role of celebrant, a person must be an ordained Episcopal priest. Persons who assist at the altar are either ordained or specially trained lay persons. After being fired from St. James church due to their sexual orientations, Harry and Ron began attending St. Michael's church, where the rector soon invited them to assist in celebrating the Eucharist at the altar. Harry and Ron accepted and served at the altar as openly gay priests. Harry reflected on this time in his ministry:

...I think one of the biggest contributions, if any, that my ministry has made is being present as an openly gay person at the altar. I think that has probably, over the years, done more than anything active I could have done... Visibility, and the rector having been supportive, says, 'This is a way to be which is OK.'..It's okay to be gay. And in saying that, it says, anybody who's struggling with that issue because of how they fit, this is a place where you can be safe, and be who you are.

Interestingly, at the time they were serving on the altar, Harry and Ron were not official priests in the parish. They were not employed by the parish and did not receive a salary for their religious service. This "unofficial" status contributed to the creation of safe space for LGBT persons and LGBT clergy in the church. Because they were not employed by the church, any conflict over having an openly gay priest as an "official" clergy in the parish was reduced. Further, it is possible that Harry and Ron's willingness to serve in this unpaid, volunteer capacity allowed St. Michael's attenders to experience their presence in the altar space and their service as openly gay clergy in a lower risk way. Open conflict over calling an openly gay priest was avoided, while still providing the opportunity to "try on" the idea of gay clergy through their presence on the altar.

Sarah, an ordained priest for eight years, also sees the altar as important symbolic space in the sanctuary:

But I have long thought that being openly gay, which I clearly am, in this church is a sign of God's openness to all people. That I hope that when people see me standing at the altar, because we believe that the priest is sort of the icon of Christ at that moment, although I'm not Christ, that they're seeing that, "Oh, so God can be or can love women and queer people."

Phyllis, in ordained ministry for ten years, says that her presence as an openly lesbian priest sends a message to the people in the pews:

I think [my sexuality] helps. One thing is we have a number – two, three, lesbian couples in the church...I think it affirms that the church affirms me and affirms them, I think especially for the new couples that to be in a church where it's accepted, that you can be there as who you are. I think that's part of what it is for me is gay, straight, trans, whatever, that this is a place where you can come and be who you are. This is in a conservative town in a conservative state.

In addition to creating safe space within the Episcopal Church for gay and lesbian persons, Bill understands his ministry as an openly gay deacon as an opportunity for non-gay and anti-gay persons to grow in their understanding and experience of LGBT persons.

Churches are still resistant [to LGBT clergy], some. But because they know they can't say "no," they won't be direct about the resistance. And then they find out, they didn't need to be. They discover the gifts that we bring, they discover, "these are nice people, they're incredibly good people." And, I've heard of situations where somebody, in a rural community, didn't think they wanted a gay priest, but then when he left, it's like, "You're the best priest we've ever had." So, it's about they can't say "no" anymore, and even though it's kind of forced on them, they find out after a while through personal experience that it's okay...I think that essentially is the story of gay people in general. It's like, "just get to know us. It'll change you. Your preconceptions will fade away, will dissolve."

Joel has been ordained for sixteen years, and reports that adults in his congregation are beginning to see gay and lesbian clergy as the norm, as he himself grew to experience female clergy as the norm:

...I have parents who tell me, 'I love the fact that we have a gay pastor and my kids see this and they just think it's normal.' And they never knew an era when it wasn't. In the same way that now women at the altar would be nothing surprising for our young people, but would have been something new for me. It's just become really very normal.

Building Relationships with Anti-LGBT Persons and Groups

Eight of fourteen participants reported doing the work of building relationships with persons and groups who exhibited negative attitudes and beliefs toward LGBT persons. Nathan described the three communities where he completed field education, curacy, and his first ministry position this way: "If you had to pick three communities that had reputations for being racist and homophobic, [it was those three communities], and that's where bishop sent me." Nonetheless, he says he established strong positive connections with all three congregations:

I think she [the bishop] knew I could handle it and I have...God has handled it through me...It has been helpful, because I knew that I could work in the midst of a mixed group of Republicans and Democrats, of straight people and gay people, and undecided majors, and have some integrity as a clergyperson in that environment...I have a wonderful relationship with all three of those congregations and I had deep worries about all of them going in.

Meryl was advised that the congregation where she served her internship was known for its anti-LGBT stance: "I had Episcopal clergy tell me to stay away from there. A couple from St. Michael's who said, 'They're very biased at St. Stephen's,' and I had a deacon tell me, 'You don't want to go there, they don't like gays.'" At the end of her internship, the vestry board asked to have Meryl continue as their deacon. Meryl accepted with the proviso that the board should know she was lesbian and would be bringing her wife to worship and other church activities. The vestry's response was very positive: "...the vestry wrote the bishop a letter saying, 'We'd like Meryl to be here,' which is a little bit

out of the norm. The bishop makes up her own mind. The vestry did that, ‘cause I had a good relationship, I worked on developing a good relationship and getting a lot of stuff going and they’re very energetic. They welcomed me and they welcomed my partner.” Through their work on relationship building, Nathan and Meryl provided the opportunity for congregations with anti-LGBT reputations to experience the ministry of gay and lesbian clergy, and to get to know gay and lesbian clergy personally. Because their work was seen in a positive light, the way was paved for other gay and lesbian clergy and individuals to become a part of those congregations.

Phyllis encountered a parish member with negative feelings toward LGBT persons when she went to serve him communion in his home after having performed the funeral for his wife: “I went and we had a wonderful time. At that time, another gay priest was serving here as a curate. The husband said, ‘Now, if your curate had come, he would not have been welcome.’ ..So we finished up, had a wonderful time, and I said, ‘Is it alright if I come back again?’ ‘Oh, yes, I’d love that.’” Phyllis then struggled with how to respond to the man’s attitude toward LGBT clergy. She consulted her Senior Warden and decided to write a letter to the man, explaining that she believed God had created her as a lesbian. She also said “If I offended you, I apologize, I would love to come see you again, but that will be up to you. Let me know...” The man ended up choosing to leave the congregation:

He called a few days, actually in tears, he goes, ‘I prayed and prayed but I just can’t accept this, so take my name off the church register.’ And that was hard. ‘Cause usually people are okay with it. They’ve known me first, and this is a man that knew me, and we had a wonderful conversation, and he must have felt I was godly enough to take communion from me, but it was still so hard for him to accept that.

Despite the member's negative beliefs and attitudes about gay and lesbian clergy, Phyllis chose to interact with him in a caring and honest way, and respected his decision to break with the congregation. Although her invitation to relationship was not ultimately accepted, Phyllis successfully created an opportunity for connection with a person who disagreed with her about gay and lesbian clergy.

Roger works in campus ministry, and occasionally faces negative reactions based on his sexual orientation. Relying on his experience as a professor answering students who questioned his orientation, Roger handles these situations in this way:

The same way I used to handle it with students who were in my class, when they'd say, "I just don't know if I can affirm this or not."...It will always be "I don't want to be so arrogant to say to you, "I know God better than you do, I know God's will better than you do." People tried to do that to me when I was where you are [believing homosexuality is a sin], and it didn't work. I'm not doing it. And I understand that just because you think this about me, it doesn't mean you're not a loving person... You have beliefs that you feel you have to honor and I will honor the fact that you do that.

Attributing the best motives to those who don't believe as he does, and engaging them in respectful dialogue creates the opportunity for relationship and possibly a change in attitude about gay and lesbian clergy and LGBT persons in general.

Kevin shared the story of a such a transformational relationship he became a part of in his first parish:

After I got [to my first parish], the Junior Warden told me in casual conversation, he said, : "You know, I'm not sure what to think about gay people, and I wasn't sure about having you come, but I like you and I respect you. I wanted to let you know." I said that was fine. We did stuff together. He became terminally ill and I ended up, I was there when he died, I buried him. But before he died, he and his wife told me that he had completely changed, that my being there, he was just so glad...[He had changed his thinking] about the whole issue. And not because I tried to change his mind or talk to him or anything, just because he experienced me and experienced my pastoring him as he was dying.

Counseling and Speaking with Attenders

Eight of fourteen participants reported that they had spoken to or counseled with individuals and groups in their congregations regarding homosexuality. In these one-on-one or small group conversations, they could reassure LGBT persons that they were accepted and safe within the congregation and, in a larger, sense, accepted and loved by God. Clergy also spoke about their experiences of being gay or lesbian and Christian to small groups, creating a safe space for gay and straight persons to discuss their doubts and questions.

Harry remembers one such opportunity in his early days at St. Michael's:

This happened at St. Michael's. Early on I and another gay clergy were asked to speak to a junior high and high school class. There were maybe 10 kids there. To talk about the fact that we were gay, and what it meant, and to answer questions that they might have...And then a few years later, one of the kids who was in that class said, "Could I drop by this evening, for a few minutes?" So my partner and I said, "Sure, come on down..." This is a kid who was maybe 18 or 19 at the time, and going off to college in the fall, and he said, "I wanted to come by and thank you, because I'm at a stage in my life right now of passage. I've been thinking about this. I know that I'm gay...I'm okay about that, in fact, I've been strong enough about that that I could talk that over with my parents..." He said, "But I just wanted to thank you for being there, because I always knew it was okay." Now that kid is a priest today...here's somebody that didn't feel like he needed to commit suicide. Here's somebody who could lay out who he was in a positive sense, and be an example to others too, along the way...So, visibility is critical in a safe environment.

Ron, Paul, Kevin, Seth, and Nathan mentioned counseling persons who were coming to grips with their own sexual identities. Joel identified the issue of shame about a same-sex orientation as a key focus in such counseling:

I've had some interactions with other gay men who have been ashamed of their sexuality and I've been able to talk with them about that. I'm thinking in particular of one gay man who got into a lot of drug abuse, he was a meth addict, and did it over shame about his own sexuality. And so, I'm thinking, in that instance, it was helpful for him to see the church is

not only accepting someone, but has blessed them and consecrated them for leadership in the church, having this orientation.

Phyllis was contacted by a woman outside her parish who had read about a pro-LGBT gathering in an adjacent town where Phyllis spoke. After the newspaper article was published, "...I got a call from a mom saying, 'My son just came out, can he come and talk to you?' ...someone read the article in the newspaper, my name associated to it, and mom wanted me to talk to her high school aged son, so I said, 'Of course.'" By directly addressing the issue of homosexuality as an ordained gay or lesbian person, Phyllis and the other participants created and promoted space for thoughtful dialogue, safety, and affirmation for LGBT persons in their parishes and communities.

"Making A Way": Balancing Ministry with Identity Advocacy

While many participants exhibited religious agency by "gaining voice" through coming out and engaging in confronting talk with anti-LGBT persons and groups, many participants also reported performing a kind of balancing act between their clergy and gay or lesbian identities in their ministry settings. In other words, they sometimes chose *not* to focus on their sexual identity or the rights accorded them as ordained gay and lesbian persons, instead choosing to focus on the pastoral needs of their parishioners or their perceived call to ministry. Six of fourteen clergy reported such choices. For instance, when Joel accepted his first position as an openly gay priest, there were some members of the congregation who chose to leave the church: "...these were people for whom, their tradition really presented them a challenge to receive leadership from a gay or lesbian person." Nevertheless, Joel thanked these members and maintained relationships with them. These relationships became important later on:

Interestingly, one woman, her husband stayed and she did not. When he died, she had to come back for his funeral, she wanted to have the funeral there. We worked out an arrangement where her pastor presided at the liturgy and I preached so that she could feel comfortable receiving communion. I'm okay with things like that...When someone dies, that's not the moment to try to rub something in someone's face. So I said, "How can we make this work in a way that will have you able to receive communion and worship here?" So we worked this out...She was very grateful. I still get Christmas cards from her.

It was certainly Joel's right as the rector of his congregation to insist on presiding at Communion during the funeral. Instead, he chose to meet the needs of the woman who had left his church, shaping the woman's and congregation's experience of their gay priest.

Jennifer does not use her church's pulpit to explicitly advocate for lesbians or lesbian clergy. Instead, she says, "It comes out more in one on one conversation or in small group conversation. And I do that...I don't think it's out of fear, I don't feel like it's the most important story that I need to tell when I'm up there. The most important story...is that evangelism is a really lovely and beautiful thing, that we're all invited to do, and we all can do..." Meryl has experienced being presented as "lesbian clergy" by the church rector, but overall feels her ministry is not focused on her sexual identity:

There was a gay man who came [to church] a couple times, and the rector made a big deal talking to him, saying, "We got a lesbian deacon. Would you like to meet her?" I was like, "Hi. I'm a lesbian deacon..." I guess people – I don't feel like they treat me – as the "lesbian deacon." I'm just Meryl. Get me involved with the outreach...No, there's really more important things to do as disciples running around in this world. It's about loving. All of my sermons are always the Greatest Commandment ...Everything else is commentary. Nothing else quite matters except how you love as a human being. Are you loving as Jesus wants you to love? That's the primary thing.

Gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy balance opportunities to minister to their parishioners with opportunities to gain voice and advocate for gay and lesbian people and

issues. They “make a way” for gay and lesbian clergy in the Episcopal Church by choosing when and where to focus on the pastoral needs of their congregation and when and where to highlight their sexual identities. These choices mold a safe space within the Episcopal Church for gay and lesbian clergy and lay persons.

When Joan was fulfilling the steps to ordination in the Episcopal Church, she was required to meet with her rector several times. Unfortunately, the rector was quite homophobic, and insisted on discussing homosexuality at each meeting. Nevertheless, Joan persisted: “You know, I would say, ‘Can we talk about something else?’ and you know, it would still come back to that. But I just persisted. I did what was in front of me. And formed a committee [the next step in the ordination process].” If Joan had made the choice to confront the rector about his homophobia, it could have acted as a barrier to her ordination. Instead, she chose to follow what she perceived as God’s call to ministry regardless of the rector’s homonegativity.

Seth encountered homonegativity on his journey to ordination as well. He began the journey in the American Baptist Church, and when his employing church discovered that he was gay, he was fired. In addition, “I received a letter in the mail revoking my license. I still have it somewhere. I saved it for posterity. But I was ‘no longer worthy to preach the gospel.’ It was a pretty scathing letter.” At that point, Seth could have chosen to leave the path to ordained ministry, having been rejected because of his sexual orientation by the denomination in which he had spent his entire life. Instead,

I think I just, I centered my life in prayer, in discerning God’s will for me, focusing on my vocation. Because I was called. I was called to serve the church...How do I do that most faithfully? My call didn’t change just because my life situation changed. And just because people were throwing up barriers...Jesus, in the final words of the gospel of Matthew says, “And

lo I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” And just walking in that, that sense of presence, that I wasn’t alone.

By persisting in their call to ordained ministry, Joan and Seth chose their battles wisely. Joan succeeded in her journey by not allowing her rector’s negative attitude toward homosexuality to negate her perceived call to ministry; Seth succeeded by finding a denomination in which both his sexual orientation and his call to ministry could be affirmed. In overcoming their respective barriers, both made space for gay and lesbian clergy through their presence in the Episcopal Church.

Serving as Openly Gay and Lesbian Clergy in the Larger Community

While this study is primarily focused on the religious agency of gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy within the Episcopal Church, participants’ actions as openly gay and lesbian clergy often took place beyond their individual parishes. Five participants reported such actions. For instance, Seth’s work in political advocacy described above in “Gaining Voice” took place in public settings such as state legislative hearings. In addition to speaking on behalf of gay and lesbian citizens of the state, Seth’s appearance as an openly gay man wearing a clerical collar communicates the message that in the Episcopal Church, gay and lesbian persons are integral members of the community.

Roger, who serves as the director of a university ministry, reports that his presence on campus has “opened doors”:

[My sexuality] has been a positive. The faculty like me too because I’m gay... They like the fact that here is a Christian with a collar on who is gay. And that’s what a lot of students like too. Here is this religious figure who is not at all like what we expected a religious figure to be... ’Cause I’m gay. But also, you know, as they get to know me, they understand that no, I’m not worried if you’re an atheist, I’m not worried if you’re agnostic, if you’re Muslim or Jewish, that’s great. It’s partly that they realize that they can be themselves around me... It’s connected to me being atypical... I just see it as opening doors.

In Roger's case, his presence as an openly gay Episcopal priest on campus both advertises the "safe space" in the Episcopal Church for gay and lesbian persons and demonstrates the "safe space" within the larger spiritual arena for "atypical" persons, including LGBT folks.

Jennifer serves her parish as a missionary, tasked with outreach ministries. She believes that being open about her sexuality in this role is helpful to her ministry:

Because it makes me a real person in [other people's] eyes. I don't just fit the mold, and that catches them to say, "Oh maybe the things that I thought about Christianity being so terrible and conservative weren't true. Because this person in front of me is a woman and young and lesbian and she's really loving what she does and I love what we do when we're together, so this is a good thing, and maybe I have something to learn." So it piques their curiosity.

Like Roger, Jennifer's presence as an ordained Episcopal priest and a lesbian speaks of safety and affirmation for LGBT persons within the Episcopal and the larger Christian traditions.

Forming and Supporting Religious LGBT Advocacy Groups

Two of the study participants who had the longest careers in full-time ministry were active in Integrity, an Episcopalian advocacy group for LGBT persons. Harry, who has served as an ordained priest for 47 years, described Integrity in its early iteration as "a thorn in the side of the church." Harry's early ministry years coincided with the anti-LGBT campaign of Anita Bryant. Harry and Ron, a colleague at St. James Episcopal Church, felt that "it was important to do something" about the homonegative images and discourse being promulgated by the campaign:

...what Anita Bryant was doing was she was getting all the gay teachers in Florida fired. She was equating being gay with being perverted, a pedophile, the condition of being gay as being immoral and a matter of choice, that pedophilia was given. If you thought of a gay person they

were automatically a pedophile. It's only because society was so uninformed.

Harry and Ron proceeded to establish a chapter of Integrity at St. Michael's church, where such a group would be welcome:

Integrity, there were several of these groups that had formed about that time, to be supportive to gay people...I think that it was primarily to help the church understand something. To be educational to the church, but it was obvious the issue was discrimination...We did form the chapter of Integrity, which was not just gay people, was to be anybody who was concerned about the disenfranchisement that gay people were feeling. The whole purpose of that group was to get together and to do some things to draw awareness to the fact that this was a discriminatory practice, and what are gay people about. It was to be a kind of, in a sense, a thorn in the side of the church...And how the church understood gay people, and how the church – it was the edge that the church needed to grow on.

The Integrity group began to publish a newsletter for gay and lesbian Episcopalians and their friends in the diocese, and circulated the newsletter to the diocesan office.

Eventually the bishop of the diocese began attending occasional meetings of Integrity, which Harry felt legitimated its presence and the space it provided for gays and lesbians in the Episcopal Church: "...the bishop's presence there made [Integrity] legitimate. I mean, he wasn't there every time, but he was there periodically and met with the people and he became known to them...I think that what [the bishop's presence] says is that its normal."

Nathan, who has been an ordained clergy for two years but an Episcopalian for many more years, began his involvement with Integrity before he consciously considered becoming ordained.

Also important for you to know is that, when I joined the Episcopal Church, I was in a diocese which had a very homophobic bishop. He tried to quash the formation of an Integrity chapter there. He said, 'You all can meet, but not in diocesan property.'...The parish I was attending said, 'We own our own building, you can meet here,' and it quickly grew.

As a part of a group that created safe and affirming space for gay and lesbian Episcopalians in his diocese, Nathan exercised his religious agency even before attaining clergy status.

Church Signs

Two of the participants described the use of words and symbols on church signage to indicate welcome to LGBT persons. Paul narrated an instance of asking permission of a parish to add a rainbow flag at the bottom of their sign:

I remember in an East Coast parish, we redid the whole sign, and the diocese helped me put a lot of money, I said, “would you mind if we put a rainbow flag, just at the bottom?” They said, “No, that’s okay.” ...it was a typical Protestant church sign, which you could change. I put the rainbow at the bottom. And as people would come in, I would get gay men and some lesbians say, “Does the rainbow mean what I think it means?” I go, “Yes, it does.” And then I would introduce my partner.

For Seth, a pro-LGBT symbol on the parish sign came after an 18 month-long conversation about the identity of the congregation.

And out of that discussion, it says, ‘Welcome to our parish.’ It has, ‘Open. Inclusive. Diverse. Serving God, Serving Others.’ ...And then... there’s another banner that says the numerous things that we are, and then, it has the Episcopal shield, but it has the rainbow shield as part of it, as part of our identity. I think it’s just a little important piece.

Flexible Alignment

Three strategies described by gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy fit Leming’s (2007) religious agency category of “Flexible Alignment.” By choosing to serve in the closet, separating their understanding of God from the formal church structure, and choosing not to respond to every anti-LGBT expression, clergy were able to fulfill their identities as persons called by God to vocational ministry, and remain present in the Episcopal Church to work for justice and inclusion.

Five clergy relayed stories of serving “in the closet” – without revealing or discussing their gay or lesbian sexual identity. The three longest-serving priest participants, Harry, Ron, and Paul, all began their ordained ministries as closeted gay priests. Because they were able to accept a level of dissonance between Episcopal Church doctrine and their identity as persons called to ministry, they were able to become ordained and begin ministry. Interestingly, all three described the “slippage” between doctrine and practice as a dynamic operating beyond individual gay clergy.

Paul had several closeted gay friends in seminary and operated under an unwritten rule with the diocesan bishop:

But when I went to seminary, even though there were gay men, we weren't out yet. We were out to each other... We were kinda sorta out to some of the faculty, who knew, they were all very very good men... You have to go see a psychiatrist and all that. I never got asked, I think if I was Roman Catholic, I would have been asked about my sexual orientation, but it never came up... So for the first, from 1977 until like around 1991, I basically was in the closet to parishioners. Like every other gay rector I knew... It was one of those unwritten rules that [bishops] knew [clergy's sexual orientation], and they didn't talk about it.

Two other participants, Meryl and Joel, also chose to serve for a time without revealing or discussing their sexual orientation with parishioners. As he was pursuing ordination, the pastor of Joel's parish was very conservative and not supportive of gay and lesbian clergy. Joel was advised by friends to “just play the game”:

I was not strong enough in that time, to voice my objections or be a pain in his side. I got pulled aside by some folks who said, “Look, if you want to get through the ordination process, you're just going to have to play the game.” At this point, the Episcopal Church wasn't ordaining openly gay folks. So I told the Bishop in that diocese that I was gay, and he said, basically, “I'm the only person that needs to know this... the Episcopal Church was not ordaining openly gay folks outside a handful of dioceses like California and Newark. So it was either move to California and start over completely... for a college student who's eager to get on with his life,

and for someone who's wired very impatiently, I just thought, well, "I'll cut a deal with the devil here and just be quiet."

Meryl was asked to conceal her lesbian identity during her internship by the rector of the parish:

Nothing at all was said during my internship [about sexual identity], and my partner did not go...it was deceitful, but I was also trying to respect [the rector's] wishes, and how he saw the parish and didn't want to disrupt the parish, and there's some Tea Party people in the parish. And lots of Republicans. And I've since now known some very good progressives and Democrats. But he didn't want to upset the apple cart, so I didn't say anything.

As related under "Making Space," Meryl's internship went well and she was invited to become the deacon at the parish. She accepted with the requirement that the church vestry and membership were aware of her sexual orientation and welcome her partner.

While none of the five clergy who chose to serve in the closet felt it was a healthy situation, they were able to balance those concerns with their identity as persons called to vocational ministry. In so doing, they were guided by the unwritten rules operating in some dioceses of the Episcopal Church, or out of a desire to respect their supervisor's wishes. Their choice allowed them to become ordained and/or remain in the Episcopal tradition.

Keenan (2016) describes a strategy among gay Anglican clergy in England that allows them to continue their full-time ministry in a setting where official policy has not approved of gay and lesbian clergy. The clergy learn to separate their personal understanding of and relationship with God from the doctrine and policy of the Anglican Church. In this way, their identity as persons called by God to full-time vocational ministry does not conflict with the structural position that gay and lesbian persons are not acceptable for ordination. Four participants related such a sense of separation as part of

their stories. Harry articulated the conflict between his sexuality and Episcopal Church doctrine as "...a conflict with the institution."

Kevin made a decision not to engage every anti-LGBT opinion that is expressed in the larger Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion:

There's nothing I can do about it, so I try not to put my energy into things that I can't affect. But it does hurt. Sometimes I tell people this constant questioning about gay people, sometimes it's like conservative Christians doing it, you know, and other times, it's people in the Anglican Communion. It's kind of like battery acid dripping on your soul. It's just like this constant, never-ending sense of somehow you're just not – there's something wrong with you, you're not acceptable, you're not okay, God hates you, or you're sinful or whatever it is. It's like, "You know, I don't need that." So that's why I try to not deal with it as much... So I've had people yell and scream at me. At some point,... I moved on. Let somebody else do that now, because you can only do that so much and then you have to move on to other things.

While Kevin supports the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as his spiritual home, he resists the idea that his support means rebutting anti-LGBT sentiment wherever it is found. This allows him to focus on his ministry and other opportunities to influence the church.

DISCUSSION

Participants reported a variety of methods of reconciling their sexual and religious identities. Older participants experienced this process during a time when the Episcopal Church and society as a whole treated the issue of homosexuality as taboo. These participants were nonetheless able to reconcile their identities with the aid of mentors inside and outside the Church, and print resources that addressed the issue in a progressive manner. Their high education level and the historical-critical methods of Biblical interpretation practiced in the Episcopal Church also militated toward a successful integration. Eleven of fourteen participants reported that a spiritual mentor such as a monk, nun, pastor, or priest, were helpful to them. Seven of those eleven persons went on to report assisting those in the process of developing a minority sexual identity through discussion and/or counseling as part of their own ministries. As minority sexualities grew in visibility and acceptance in the wider society over time, younger participants reported less internal conflict between being gay and being Christian; in fact, the youngest reported no conflict at all. The story shared by Harry, featuring the young gay man who grew up in the parish where Harry was an unpaid affiliate priest, and who thanked Harry and his partner for helping him understand that being gay was acceptable, is an example of changing attitudes within one Episcopal Church. As gay and lesbian clergy began to serve openly in the Episcopal Church, new generations of LGBT members had the opportunity to witness the integration of sexual and religious identities from their early years. It is possible that in progressive religious traditions, the idea of needing to integrate the two identities is on the decline.

Exploring the experiences of ordained gay and lesbian persons allows a focus on successful integration of religious and sexual identities, due to the high religious commitment of clergy. Leaving the church because of anti-LGBT sentiment, doctrine, Biblical interpretation, and policy would mean not just a loss of Episcopal faith tradition for them, but also loss of their third salient identity – a person called by God to a religious vocation. As illustrated by the challenges and concerns experienced by participants as they traveled the path to ordination and ministry, remaining in the church required compromise and creativity. All clergy who serve in denominations where hiring is accomplished through a “call” system – congregations interview and hire their pastor – face concerns about finding a good “fit” with a particular congregation. And most clergy in most denominations face the challenge of balancing their professional, personal, and family roles and needs. The gay and lesbian clergy in this study, however, faced an additional layer of difficulty, particularly those who began ministry in the Episcopal Church prior to 1996, when the heresy trial of Bishop Wright established the right of bishops to ordain openly gay and lesbian clergy. For these persons, meeting their personal social needs risked disapproval, criticism, or firing by their parishes, as well as general social disapprobation. Harry, Ron, and Paul experienced all of this and more early in their careers.

The Christian religious tradition includes a redemptive understanding of suffering – that those who suffer can go on to help others who suffer similarly. This idea was reflected in the ways clergy described their gay or lesbian sexual identities as gifts for ministry. Bill described himself as a “wounded healer” – one who has been injured but is nonetheless able to help others recover from similar injuries – as he worked with LGBT

persons in his parish struggling with integrating their sexual and religious lives, and as he worked with the heterosexual majority to help them understand the importance of hearing LGBT stories. Nathan reflected that the very pieces of his identity he and others had believed would disqualify him for ministry had, in fact, become valuable skillsets for his work: integrating and affirming his own identity, critical Biblical interpretation around the issue of sexuality, building a supportive community for himself. These experiences translated into effective leadership for parish identity discussions, teaching and designing worship, and establishing a welcoming and affirming community in his parish for LGBT and heterosexual members. One third of participants related an increased awareness of social power dynamics and disenfranchisement, allowing them both to relate empathetically with the people in their pews who struggled, and to lead their congregations to understand and respond to the marginalized within and outside their parish. These abilities also connect strongly with the social justice thread within the Christian religious tradition.

Gay and lesbian clergy occupy a unique position in the structure of the Episcopal Church. They are the acknowledged, ordained leaders of their parishes, with the considerable authority and power that status brings; they also serve under the supervision, guidance, and watchful eye of their diocesan bishop. As parish priests and deacons, they can exert their power through the pulpit, through discussions with the lay vestry board, through supervising associate clergy and parish staff, and through exercising their pastoral initiative – contacting individuals and families experiencing loss, grief, and trouble of many kinds. As ministers in a diocese, they must obey the policies of the diocesan bishop, who represents the Episcopal hierarchy, and answer to that person when

a question about doctrine or practice arises. In this way, Episcopal clergy are both representatives of Church structure, and agents within it. The participants in this study demonstrated creativity, humility, and courage in negotiating this dual status, even as they intentionally acted in ways that allowed lay members and bishops to see, hear, and experience the ministry of gay and lesbian clergy. Nine of the fourteen participants reported activities that could be considered “resistance” agency: testifying to the state legislature as an LGBT advocate, marching in Pride parades wearing clerical garb, openly identifying as a gay or lesbian Episcopal clergy in community/public settings. These clergy could be understood to be resisting not only the early prohibition against gay clergy in the Episcopal Church, but also the more generalized religious homonegativity in the wider society. At the same time, the majority of the sample (ten of fourteen participants, including seven from the “resistance” group, above), also reported types of agency that required them to build relationships with anti-LGBT individuals and groups, or to balance their desire for LGBT positive actions with the pastoral needs of their parish. These clergy understood that in order to continue their witness and presence in the Episcopal Church, they had to listen respectfully to disagreement or disapproval from persons in their congregations, winning them the right to continue their ministry and to continue to offer the opportunity for growth and change to parish and community members. Phyllis and Joel both narrated instances where parish members could not accept them as priests because of their sexual orientation. In both cases, the clergy respected these decisions but maintained respectful and open connections, preserving the opportunity for growth. While clergy’s authority in a parish could extend to terminating a person’s membership or access to sacraments, participants recognized the delicate

balance between exerting that authority and creating the “points of resistance and potential transformation” (Leming 2007) necessary for meaningful change.

CONCLUSION

The current study contributes to the sociology of religion in several ways. First, it extends the understanding of religious agency as practiced by marginalized people within religious organizations. The bulk of existing literature on this topic concerns women in gender traditional religions, and there are strong similarities between the types of agency demonstrated by these women and that described by the participants in this study. A small body of research on the agentic behaviors of LGBT persons within conservative religious traditions is available, but it is limited to LGBT lay persons. Exploring and describing the experiences and religious agency of gay and lesbian clergy adds to this literature by including persons who both embody and are subject to the authority of religious structure. Second, it adds to what is known about the micro-level strategies of persons within congregations and denominations as they work to create a more just and inclusive Church. This study demonstrates that for one group of Episcopal clergy, these strategies include both overt political and public advocacy for LGBT persons as well as everyday relationship strategies with homonegative, neutral, and questioning individuals and groups. Third, by investigating the resources used by gay and lesbian Episcopal clergy to reconcile their homosexual and Christian identities, the sociological understanding of identity reconciliation will be expanded by adding data on persons for whom the two identities are particularly salient. Participants interviewed for this study revealed that religious mentors, progressive religious literature, LGBT support groups, and progressive congregations are particularly important. Finally, the project has included both gay and lesbian clergy, increasing knowledge about the lived experiences of lesbian clergy. While not a focus of this study, two of the female participants did report instances

of resistance to female clergy that had to be negotiated in addition to instances of homonegativity. Nearly all scholarly research on gay clergy takes as its subject gay priests in the Catholic or Anglican tradition. While a minority of clergy in all traditions are women, their experiences within various denominations can vary significantly from those of male clergy, and should therefore be highlighted.

This qualitative study presents several opportunities for further research. First, as referenced in the “Discussion” section, as progressive religious traditions continue to ordain and hire LGBT clergy, will the social and scholarly concern with reconciling religious and sexual identities decline? For two of this study’s participants, one who grew up in a progressive tradition, and one who grew up with no religious tradition, the idea of “reconciling” those two identities was not highly salient. They, in effect, had never or rarely questioned the religious ramifications of a gay or lesbian identity, or the reverse. The new horizon for research in the area of religion and sexuality may, in fact, turn to the experiences of transgender and non-binary sexual identities. As participant Joel reflected,

...this [ordaining gay and lesbian priests] is quickly not the new hot topic. I think we need to now ask ourselves, “Who are the next wave out that are in the margins that need to be welcomed and included?”...we have people who are transgendered or intersexed that are not welcome in the ordination process, the church doesn’t know what to do with them. There’s a real hesitation.

While conservative and moderate religious traditions continue to struggle with the issue of homosexuality and minority sexualities, there are progressive, LGBT-affirming traditions available in the American religious “marketplace.” What affect will these choices have, particularly in the context of the rapidly growing number of “religious nones” in the religious landscape (Pew Research Forum 2016)?

A second avenue for further research would be to examine the topic of LGBT ordination in the Episcopal Church from an institutional perspective. The ordination of women was not officially approved in this body until 1979, relatively late compared to almost all mainline denominations in the U.S.; however, the decision to ordain gay and lesbian persons happened “only” thirty years later, a fairly short period in religious history. Some scholars point to a connection between ordaining women and ordaining gays and lesbians, theorizing that:

Activists [for women’s ordination in the Episcopal Church] learned that aggressively pushing beyond barriers and moving past accepted standards can be effective...The same critical biblical scholarship that provided warrant for female clergy could be utilized to support full LGBT inclusion; [and] with the ascendancy of women to leadership roles, the churches became more progressive (Holmen 2013:99).

Several of this study’s participants echoed this connection between ordaining women and ordaining LGBT persons. This theorized connection could be investigated on the meso-level, as well as a related question -- comparing the institutional processes of change in those religious traditions that now ordain LGBT clergy in the U.S. What are the effects of religious agents within the structure, establishing “points of resistance and potential transformation,” and of external forces outside the structure, such as reference group denominations, denominational authority structure, and larger social dynamics (Chaves 1997)? What do these influences have to say about the potential for change in denominations that are still conflicted over the ordination of LGBT persons?

The ordained gay and lesbian persons who participated in this study shared their experiences of identity reconciliation and negotiation, and the ways that they undertook “a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity” (Leming

2007:74). The choices made by these clergy allowed them to work toward a more just and inclusive Episcopal Church.

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APPENDIX INTERVIEW GUIDE

Let us begin with some background questions so that I can get to know more about you before we talk about your experiences. I will use the answers to these questions for an overall description of who participated in the study.

1. Which age range would you place yourself in? 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79
80-89
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your sexuality?
4. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
5. How long have you been an ordained Episcopal clergy? _____
6. Do you have a spouse/partner? Y/N How long have you been with your spouse/partner? ____

I. Tell me about your religious upbringing?

Probes: What were your parents'/grandparents' religious beliefs and practices?

What religious events or experiences from your life stand out the most?

What was going on in your life when you became aware that you wanted to become a priest?

II. Can you describe what it was like when you first identified as gay/lesbian?

Probes: What was your understanding of what it meant to be gay/lesbian and a Christian?

III. How did your gay/lesbian identity play out in different ministry settings?

Probes: How did you respond to actions and/or words in the church that were negative about your homosexuality?

IV. Are there any events in the recent history of the Episcopal Church that may have influenced the eventual decision to ordain gay and lesbian persons? If so, how?

Probe: Did the ordination of women have any effect on the decision to ordain gay and lesbian persons?

V. Do you see your sexuality as one of your gifts for ministry? If so, how?

VI. Has the ordination of LGBT persons affected the larger Episcopal Church? If so, how?

VII. Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

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Curriculum Vitae

Education

Master of Arts in Sociology

Identity Reconciliation and Religious Agency in Gay and Lesbian Episcopal Clergy
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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Central Baptist Theological Seminary
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Teaching Experience

Adjunct Professor of Sociology, Ivy Tech Community College Indianapolis, IN
SOC1 111 Introduction to Sociology
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Graduate Teaching Assistant, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
R100 Introduction to Sociology
Fall Semester 2016

Facilitator, *Make Poverty Personal* study
All Saints Episcopal Church of Indianapolis
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Facilitator, The Holy Spirit and co-facilitator, Sacraments
All Saints Episcopal Church of Indianapolis Journey in Faith series
2011

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Franklin
Selected, wrote, prepared, taught, and evaluated curriculum for adult Bible study,
theology, spiritual formation, and moral issues studies
2005-2010

Instructor, Introduction to Theology course
Church Leadership Institute of American Baptist Churches of Indiana/Kentucky
2004

Adjunct Professor, Franklin College Franklin, IN
Introduction to Religion
Fall Semester 2002, 2003

Publications

Stensland, Brian, and Amy Hemphill. 2016. "Religious Giving: Patterns, Data, and Prospects." Report prepared for the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

"Linking Local Churches to Make A Bridge Out of Homelessness." The Christian Citizen. 4:16-17, 2007.

Honors and Awards

University Fellow
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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