How The Church Treats The LGBT Community

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of literature connecting church with the LGBT community, and a sampling of qualitative interviews with members of the LGBT community discussing their interactions with the church. Much of the literature describes experiences of LGBT persons as not positive. While the qualitative interviews produces some negative views about God and church, there were interviews that were positive, with the LGBT members being thankful for their church and its response to their orientation. Other interviews began with negative stories, but ended with current positive situations for the LGBT members. Church leaders need to recognize that LGBT lives matter, and that LGBT members can contribute to the mission of the church.

*Keywords: church, spirituality, religious, religion, religiosity, LGBT community*

How the Church Treats the LGBT Community

On June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled that the US Constitution guarantees the right for same-sex couples to marry in all 50 US states. "The Court, in this decision, holds same-sex couples may exercise the fundamental right to marry in all States." (Obergefell et all. V. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health, et al., 2015).

**Introduction and Literature Review**

Marriage is one of the great sacraments of the church. In 2001North Americans opposed same-sex marriage 57% to 35%. A recent poll reports a majority of North Americans (55%) support same-sex marriage, with 37% opposing it (Pew Research Center, 2016). The Supreme Court decision has fueled animosity toward the LGBT community. The blame of a few, for this animosity, gets laid at the feet of the church. Church people can be rude and violent, especially about this issue of same-sex marriage (Todd & Ong, 2012). While the LGBT movement should not be compared to the Civil Rights movement, there are some similarities that are haunting when studying both. What some people did in the 1960’s in the name of God, the church, and the Holy Bible was so wrong. Some of the same things happen today against minorities.

Original academic research on religion/spirituality (R/S) and health is voluminous. Koenig (2012) published a review of 1,200 quantitative studies between 1872 and 2000, and 2,100 quantitative studies between 2000 and 2010 covering these constructs. This review did not include qualitative studies on R/S that are numerous. There are multiple ways that R/S play out in the lives of many North Americans. There are wholesome effects on different areas of health including less depression and psychological distress (Ellison & Flannelly, 2009), greater satisfaction with life, happiness, and well-being (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Krause, 2004) and higher levels of internal (perceived) control (Jackson & Bergeman, 2011; Fiori, Brown, Cortina, & Antonucci, 2006). R/S and church lie on a very wide continuum from extremely conservative (some might call fundamentalist) to extremely liberal (what some call very progressive). As an example of fundamentalist, Vincent, Parrott, and Peterson (2011) found that religious fundamentalism has many aspects, 1) some of which increase risk for aggression toward gay men and lesbians, and 2) other aspects decrease this risk.

R/S has effects on different populations. Since the purpose of this investigation was to explore how the church treats the subgroup/minority LGBT community, it was important to find out if other groups had been studied connected with the R/S and health constructs, besides the seemingly default white, middle-class samples that are typically drawn for social science research as evidenced by the many studies published with LDS church members and R/S and health (Allen & Wang, 2014). (“LGBT” will be used throughout this paper to represent this marginalized community, understanding that “the struggle over the proper naming for the complex of feelings and actions that are involved in same-sex relations—gay men and lesbians, as opposed to homosexuals—is not trivial” (Gagnon, 1981)). Some examples of subgroups/minorities in this area of study include Israeli Jews (Levin, 2013), Filipino Americans (Nadal & Corpus, 2013), adolescents in India (Santoro, Benkhoukha, Ramanayake, Suchday, & Kapur, 2015), Latino families (Koerner, Shirai, & Pedroza, 2013), secondary data analysis focusing on youth (Petts, 2014), African American women (Lamis, Wilson, Lansford, Tarantino, and Kaslow, 2014), Kuwaiti accident victims (Ashkanani, 2009), and adolescents (Goeke-Morey, Merrilees, Taylor, Shirlow, & Cummings, 2014).

R/S are multi-faceted variables in the literature. For several years they were conceptualized synonymously (Nelson, Jacobson, Weinberger, Bhaskaran, Rosenfold, Breitbart, & Roth, 2009). Researchers lately have begun to define and operationalize them separately. Examples of “spirituality” would be “…the search for transcendent meaning” – can be expressed in religious practice or …expressed ”exclusively in their relationship to nature, music, the arts, a set of philosophical beliefs, or relationships with friends and family” (Astrow, Pulchalski, & Sulmasy, 2001); “a person’s experience of, or a belief in, a power apart from his or her own existence” (Mohr, 2006); and, …refers to a broad set of principles that transcend all religions. Spirituality is about the relationship between ourselves and something larger….Spirituality means being in the right relationship with all that is” (Kaiser, 2000).

Religion/religiosity has been defined as, “a set of beliefs, practices, and language that characterizes a community that is searching for transcendent meaning in a particular way, generally based upon belief in a deity” (Astrow, Pulchalski, & Sulmasy, 2001); “religious beliefs – formed within the context of practices and rituals shared by a group to provide a framework for connectedness to God” (Davies, Brenner, Orloff, Sumner, & Worden, 2002); and, “an organized system of practices and beliefs in which people engage … a platform for the expression of spirituality…” (Mohr, 2006).

If one reads the definitions above, one would think that every human in the world would be loved and accepted and no abuse or violence would exist. It should be like the examples we have of the early church mentioned in Scripture. Many atrocities in the world are and have been caused by church people. What the Holy Bible defines as *the church* and how that is and has been lived out are mostly two different things. This paper is not defaming *the church* as it was originally meant to be in Scripture. The investigation and interviews contained herein provide the beginnings of an ethnographic study of some members of the LGBT community and their positive and negative experiences with church.

LGBT communities and R/S and church are not new topics in academic research. White (2008) provides a historical look at the roots of LGBT churches organizing in the United States beginning in Atlanta, Georgia in 1946. She makes a very important point in her research of this movement:

“By situating the gay church movement of the 1960s and 1970s in broader historical context, I chart the emerging spaces for discussing, performing, and proclaiming queer religious identities. Far from simply transplanting a political conception of gay identity into a religious arena, the religious movements I examine constructed and expressed a gay religious identity as an intrinsic—even divinely created—part of the self. Such a conception of identity countered opposing Christians' charge that homosexuality was a sinful behavior, and it provided the medium for reclaiming religious traditions that condemned homosexuality and gender variance.” p. 103.

The LGBT community discovered early on that established churches—especially conservative protestant churches were not friendly. While conservative Christianity has not been the sole force behind producing and sustaining the historical antipathy toward the LGBT communities, it has exacerbated it because of its numerical majority and privilege in the United States (Russell & Bohan, 2014). Keep in mind that early in the 20th century homosexuality was changed from sin to sickness (mental illness) (Morin & Rothblum, 1991). It wasn’t until 1973 that homosexuality was depathologized—27 years after Helen Pappas and George Hyde founded the Eucharistic Catholic Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Point—we all have a part to play in social justice.

Having “all gay” churches does not address the root problem of how the church has and does treat the LGBT community. Ninety-eight percent of the participants interviewed for this paper grew up in a church—their church! To be kicked out or restricted from participating publically was traumatic for them and an injustice. Over and over the same is true in other fellowships. Johnson (2016) reports that gay LDS members have to decide to go by the rules of the church or be excommunicated. Since many LDS children have their lives laid out for them from birth, a decision to go against this, to create a new life plan, is not a decision to take lightly.

So why does the LGBT community even bother with religion and spirituality and church? When R/S is separated from church experiences, positive and healthy attributes emerge for LGBT members such as increased self-esteem and identity affirmation, lower internalized homophobia, and fewer feelings of alienation (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Moleiro, Pinto, & Freire, 2013; Tan, 2005). It should be noted here that some in the LGBT community still suffer identity confusion and conflict even in churches that are highly gay-affirming (Smith & Horne, 2007). Members of the LGBT communities do not live in vacuums. Their lives intersect with the same variables (and others that are created against them) that all other humans face. Concerning identity with some in the LGBT communities, Wright and Stern (2015) found that spirituality was related to negative identity because of its association with a heightened sense of heteronormativity. Yarhouse and Tan (2005) found a potential conflict with sexual identity and religious identity with adolescents as they developmentally attempt to answer, “Who am I?” while listening to the LGBT communities and their religious community. This has been called the intersection of social identities by researchers (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010; Sue & Sue, 1990). “Churches” often create environments where the LGBT communities would find it difficult to integrate their spiritual and sexual identities (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010). This internalized conflict is associated with distress, internalized homophobia, depression, and suicidal ideation (Lease, et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Mahaffy, 1996). This conflict certainly may contribute to the higher ratings in all of the above areas and others in the literature for gay men as compared to straight men (Lewis, 2009; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009). It has been reported that the majority of gay men experience these conflicts when put in situations (i.e., group therapy, social settings) with straight men (Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith, 2014).

For a moment, imagine being a black man and gay. All of the above magnified. Imagine being a black man and gay and in a church. “You can’t be gay and black in a church. If you are gay you can’t be a man. So why do you stay? We stay because church is our family. You don’t abandon your whole family for one bad element.” (from *Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church*, BET Documentary, directed by Clay Cane, 2015). Black LGBT members are more likely to continue participating in their churches than white LGBT members (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Church and religious faith have been and are instrumental in positive mental health outcomes for African Americans (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). The church is one of the great pillars of the Black community (Griffin, 2006; Miller, 2007). Tinson (2013) says:

“Historically the black church has been a place for creating individual, systemic, and political change within the black community. From its emergence in the late 18th century to its present day relevance, the black church has and will always serve as a safe haven for African Americans, a place to worship God together, and a place where we are motivated to rebuild our communities. You can guarantee that on Sunday between the hours of 7 a.m. (early morning service) to 4 p.m. (afternoon service) there will be a large population of blacks attending church.”

In the Black church community religious faith still can contribute to higher levels of resiliency when there are struggles with internalized homonegativity (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). Problems arise when the church is not tolerant, or even open to listening. The implications of this intolerance may be enduring according to Sowe, Brown, and Taylor (2014). They compared LGBT communities of religious, nonreligious, and formerly religious members, finding that despite having left the church, former Christians still reported high levels of homonegativity. There is also evidence in addition to the conflicts mentioned here of acts of microaggressions against people of color (POC) that contribute to negative effects for the black LGBT communities (Nadal, Davidoff, Davis, Wong, Marshall, & McKenzie, 2015; Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). Black males who experienced these acts of microaggressions reported more anxiety, distress, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Intersect these microaggressions with being gay, and the abuse is multiplied. Surely God did not make these people a minority. They must be “broke.” So, good intentioned families, pastors, and priests that haven’t totally turned their back on their children and their congregants have attempted to “fix” the LGBT communities.

The church and some families exacerbate the confusion mentioned above by pressing those with same sex attraction (SSA) and even those fully out, to get “fixed,” to become “ex-gay.” The term “ex-gay” was introduced into the literature by Pattison and Pattison (1980). This “fixing” is discussed in the literature as conversion therapy, reparative therapy, or as sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) (Dehlin, Galliher, Hyde, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2015). The verdict is still out on the “curing power” of SOCE. Studies have shown the perceived benefits and the negative harmful takeaways from SOCE (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Haldeman, 1994; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Throckmorton, 2002). An APA (2009) SOCE task force concluded that no conclusive study to date proves that there are prevalent or frequent benefits or harms using SOCE. There are several reviews in the literature that examine the different treatments used to “fix” homosexuals in the past (Drescher, 1998; Murphy, 1992; Stein, 1996). Conversion treatments are condemned by most agencies, counselors, and therapists.

It seems that there is some progress being made in the struggle for equal rights for minority groups such as those in the LGBT communities. Will all churches ever affirm people that are same-sex attracted? Will all churches ever be tolerant of all peoples? Is it more important for some churches to keep their conservative identity and therefore possibly reject some people? Should same-sex attracted people forget the churches they grew up in and only attend all gay churches? Should all churches perform all of the sacraments for all people? Should other para-church and religiously-based organizations be tolerant toward LGBT communities? Should all family members be totally accepting of LGBT members that have come out? These are a few of the questions that drove the following investigation.

**Methodology**

Clay Cane was asked (by a reporter after watching his documentary *Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church*), why he made his documentary. His answer was:

“I would say that. I’m not giving you some grand solution, but there’s one takeaway that I hope people get: Spiritual violence and theological violence is just as damaging as emotional abuse. It is just as damaging as physical abuse. If you think you’re doing things in the name of Christ, the name of “goodness,” and you’re damaging people, like Rev. Samuels says in the documentary, you’re undermining all of your rightness. What happens to a young person’s soul when they’re taught you’re an abomination? I have friends in their late 30’s, in their 40’s who are still trying to unlearn the lies they’ve been taught about themselves. I truly believe that if anything will make a shift, it won’t be stats and numbers. It will be stories.”

Stories are powerful. This study set out to hear stories—not stats, not numbers--to listen.

A qualitative methodology fit this project well, specifically, a Grounded Theory approach. Grounded Theory is an approach for developing theory that is "grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). A common method used in Grounded Theory is the interview. “Researchers using a Grounded Theory approach will learn about a culture or group by speaking with informants or members of the culture or group (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Face-to-face interviews, Skype sessions, Facetime sessions, and phone calls were used to collect the stories.

**The Sample**

The participants in this study (N=25) were chosen from people the investigator knew personally, from participants bringing their friends, and from referrals. As the investigator, I began to realize how sensitive this topic was among the participants. Some participants would not meet in my home because they had been “ambushed” in homes of church leaders trying to “fix” them. Most asked to please not record the sessions, and above all, not use their names (Some had to sign papers when leaving church or para-church positions saying they would not defame the institution or tell why they were “let go.”). They were a little hesitant about meeting with me and me keeping my promise to not tell. One participant at my house leaned over to me one night as we sat around the table and said, “If you help us, they will fire you.” Most of the participants old and young still asked, “Why would you help us?” There were no ulterior motives for doing this investigation, as in striking back at the church or other para-church organizations, monetary benefits, or even academic benefits. There is current research being carried out on the benefits of being allies to the LGBT community (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015). Perhaps I was attempting to “be the church” to these communities of people.

**The Context—In The Beginning**

North America is full of religions/denominations/churches. They range from conservative exclusive to progressive inclusive, and all in between. No matter what theological stance most churches take, they are mostly filled with homogenous people. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock Sunday morning” (King, 1968; Barndt, 2011).

Bruner and Chancey (2013) describe the church of which 98% of the participants in this study grew up in:

“…… the Churches of Christ, one of three significant strands of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Moment: the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ, Non-instrumental. This movement grew rapidly in the United States in the early 19th century, rooted in the quest for church unity through the restoration of the principles and practices of the primitive first-century church. Initially rejecting the use of any but canonical materials to understand the primitive church, the careful reading of Scripture was of primary importance among its members. The Churches of Christ are free churches, devoid of attachments to any over-arching government and eschewing clergy-laity distinctions, though, in practice, distinctions are sometimes implicit. One of the most distinctive features of this fellowship has been *a capella* congregational singing. Members typically have a high view of God and humanity. Churches in this faith group are more numerous in the south and southwest.”

Of the 25 participants interviewed, only two are currently attending a church of Christ sporadically, and two participants on a full-time basis. This church fellowship is much like many others in North America. It is not without fault in how accepting it has been of “others.” For example, there are “white” churches of Christ and there are “black” churches of Christ. There are deep wounds in this fellowship that have not healed from the days of the civil rights movement. However, there does seem to be some agreement among black and white church of Christ members—Gays Aren’t Welcome! Stanford (2013) asks, “With same sex-marriage, are white evangelicals and black Christian conservatives becoming one and the same?” Reverend Gregory Daniels told the *New York Times* (2004): “If the KKK opposes gay marriage, I would ride with them.” It has and continues to be a long road for white and black people that grew up in our churches that have come out, to find acceptance among their church heritage. One of the participants in this investigation is male and black. This participant has not come out even to family because of being so scared of what the black and the white church would do.

I wondered if there ever was an all-gay church of Christ. I found a link to an archive of data, photos, and history of the LGBT communities of Houston, Texas. This link led to another link that led to a large file of history on a gay church of Christ in the Houston area (see *A Cappella Chorus and Houston's Montrose Church of Christ*). As of 7-27-16 I have not been able to track down anyone who knows anything about this church. It seems to have disappeared or perhaps changed its name and affiliation. I am confident that no mainline churches of Christ would have been in fellowship with this church during that era.

In my interviews, none of the 25 participants expressed a desire to go to an all-gay church (and none had ever heard of the church in Houston mentioned above). Many wished they could go to their home church. One participant shared that they were met in the foyer of the church of Christ that they grew up in, by an elder of that church and told, “we don’t want your kind here.” They actually have this conversation recorded on one of their phones. They still attend because the preaching minister is inclusive and their family still attends there. “The minister really speaks to my heart. I can put up with the occasional harassment of a few to hear good sermons and be with my family.”

**Results--Some Initial Findings/Themes From This Investigation**

This study began with a targeted select sampling procedure due to the sensitivity of the project. Great care has been taken to protect the identity of participants. No names are used. I have been careful in the use of pronouns such as him/her (used “their” or “them” which may be incorrect grammatically in some cases) to further protect the participants. Ages of participants ranged from 21 to 55. I did not interview teenagers to avoid parental permission and other human subjects issues with minors.

Looking across the sample age-wise, an observation that rose to the top was:

***O1: Fear of victimization does not disappear with age and experience.***

From a 21 year old student being afraid of getting kicked out of university to the older couple afraid to meet in my home, the fear is real. One couple shared that they always have their power of attorney paperwork with them in case of emergencies, so that they can prove they are together. A gay couple even with the same last name is treated different, questioned, even harassed, unless they have a power of attorney.

Speaking of age, I emailed seven big churches of Christ in the United States and asked them how LGBT friendly and accepting was their church. The responses were mostly apologetic for how they have treated the LGBT communities, and most said they pretty much are in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” mode. One minister referred me to their church’s youth minister. He was even more apologetic, but also said the youth group was way more affirming and accepting of gay teens than “big” church was. “We can do things down here that the adults just can’t do or want do. If the senior minister was to push this, we would get 100 emails basically saying ‘back off’.” Which leads to another theme that emerged:

***O2: How long before churches really start doing what the Bible says about loving people?***

“It is like we are invisible as far as meeting any needs we might have that a loving church would normally provide to its members.” “They use the Bible to beat us over the head with two verses while they fail to carry out so many verses that talk about responding to one another.” These and other responses came from participants as they told their stories of trying to fit into their home churches. One participant is able to lead worship when they go back home and visit their home church. Another participant is also involved in the church’s worship times and also involved in administration tasks in the church that they are a member of. Out of all of the current university students that I interviewed, only one still attends a church of Christ. The others mention that they miss some of the elements of the churches of Christ they grew up in, but that it is not worth the struggle and pain to try and be accepted. Some also pointed out, that there are also some theological elements that they have changed views on compared to the mostly conservative churches of Christ they grew up in. These differing views may assist them in choosing to go to a more open and accepting church. The fact is, they aren’t going to churches of Christ (I am confident if I did these interviews with people that grew up in other conservative Protestant groups, the results would be very similar.)

Another observation seemed to fit under a theme of desperation:

***O3: Do the LGBT communities think about self-harm/suicide/death more than straight communities?***

Yes! I was amazed at how many of the participants were on anti-depressants in the past and currently. Two attempted suicide. Several of the younger participants discussed their suicidal thoughts after coming out. One participant came out to their spouse and then gathered their friends together to tell them. After coming out to their group of friends, the spouse divorced and the friends said they could not be friends anymore (these were church friends they had for almost four years at a “Christian” university). The participant said, “When I gathered my best friends together in our apartment and came out to them, they immediately rejected me and basically told me to get out of their lives. I had thoughts of harming myself because I felt so alone and betrayed. I didn’t actually think about doing anything, but I remember thinking to myself, ‘this is why people kill themselves.’”

These self-harm thoughts may be correlated with timing of coming out. Younger LGBT persons are twice as likely to self-harm than older members. My older participants that came out later in life reported that harming themselves was not a factor in their thoughts and decisions. Hickson, Davey, Reid, Weatherburn, and Bourne (2016) found that age was a factor in self-harm within the LGBT communities they studied.

One participant said, “I never thought about killing myself, but I would pray to God almost everyday to let me die—heart attack, car wreck, run over by a truck—didn’t matter, just relieve the pain, loneliness, and rejection.” Another participant shared the following: “Yes. When I was in college. I came to a breaking point. I was doing individual and group ex-gay focused therapy. I was involved with Exodus and after two years of digging up every "root cause" of my sexuality I was ready to give up and wanted to die. I wanted to die. There were times I contemplated suicide--which made me feel even more guilty. So much of the journey is about shame, secrecy and deep feelings of inadequacy -- failing at trying to over come my "struggle" just deepened all those feelings.”

A fourth observation surfaced as some participants discussed sexuality:

***O4: Does celibacy work for some in the LGBT communities.***

Two of the participants were adamant about being celibate for life. They felt for them that it honored God and they should be like any single heterosexual person should be that isn’t married. Both of these individuals have no desire to marry. They both grew up in very strict church of Christ fellowships. Some in the LGBT communities believe that “celibacy” is the new conversion therapy or “ex gay” therapy being thrown at them. Gay websites are full of stories and pros and cons of being celibate (i.e., <https://www.gaychristian.net/greatdebate.php>). There are also a few studies being done exploring this position (i.e., Creek, 2013). Several of the male participants expressed a desire to get married and have a family at some point in their lives. None of the participants, including the married ones, broached the subject of sex/sexuality during the interviews. One couple mentioned wearing shirts that said “We are gay and you can’t watch.”

A fifth theme that emerged concerned the spiritual side of the participants:

***O5: There are people in the LGBT communities that are very spiritual.***

Only one participant gave up on God and the church when they were in high school. “I had questions about God, the earth, sex, me—no one at the church even tried to help me find answers.” One participant wanted to be a missionary. When school officials found out they were struggling with same-sex attraction, the participant was removed from a missionary program and told they couldn’t participate until they got cured. Today, this participant does not engage in church and doesn’t talk about God and Jesus in the sense that they was were ready to give their life to in mission work. At best, the participant said they do believe in some of the principles that Jesus practiced, but choose to call them social justice issues and stay away from religion stuff.

The other participants range from very spiritual/religious in a church of Christ to occasionally attending highly liturgical churches such as Anglican or Episcopal on holidays. These have not lost their belief in God and Jesus. They do have varying opinions of the church, mainly because of how they have been treated by their former home churches. When I asked the participants why they stay involved in church and or why they keep going to church, they replied:

-All my friends are there.

-I want to make a difference with God's people so I need to be a part of it to do that.

-It is about our relationship with God (6X)

-It is the right thing to do.

-We want our adopted children to be brought up in the church.

-Taught that going to church is the thing to do when young and now owns it for myself.

-I love God. I want to be part of a church. I wish I could be part of the one I grew up in.

-My sense of faith community will never go away. Grew up living by a set of principles.

-At first I was angry at God, but not anymore. I go because I believe in God and I love God. I can see God more clearly now than when I was in high school.

-Loves God, loves Jesus, loves people.

My sixth observation is closely tied to observation number five:

***O6: Being spiritually involved in a church did not and does not come without a struggle.***

“The first fight is with yourself then you fight the church to keep your faith”. I mentioned the couple feeling attacked in the church foyer by an elder. Another couple I interviewed was shy of visiting “friends” homes because of being surprised by church leaders trying to fix them when they would get to the home. Most of the participants had to find a new church to go to. Think about it. You grow up in a pretty conservative church atmosphere, and now you are in a totally different one if you choose to step outside of churches of Christ, as most of the participants have. Even if they stayed within the Restoration movement of churches described in the introduction, there are big differences to cope with. One participant described his new church as sort of a concert instead of a worship experience. “I miss the a cappella singing, no one does that better than us” (speaking of the a cappella churches of Christ). Another person told me they had found an Anglican church that was very inclusive, but they could not do much ministry there because they were not an ordained priest. “I used to lead worship, lead mission trips, and teach. I just go with my partner now and we sit, listen, and go home.”

Ministries such as Glad Alliance ([www.gladalliance.org](http://www.gladalliance.org)) in the Restoration movement churches are a welcoming, inclusive organization dedicated to helping those in the LGBT communities become members of their churches (Disciples of Christ). Other church organizations are inclusive of LGBT communities world-wide ([www.gaychurch.org](http://www.gaychurch.org)). These organizations are very valuable in respect to persons looking for a church, for a place to get married, a youth group for their children, and last rites. One particular LGBT girl says that she is so lonely on Sundays. No one understands where she is coming from at her big church. “I hope that one day I can be out and proud before my fellow Christians at church. I know that there is nothing wrong with me” (Shore, 2013).

Participants all had their different, stressful stories of coming out:

***O7: Coming out brings on multiple stressors because of the different contexts participants feel they need to come out to.***

*Family:* Participants in this study were conflicted when it came to coming out. We know from research that it is difficult for those in LGBT communities to come out in different contexts such as families, school, work, and church. Coming out to family is a big deal, perhaps the most difficult context (Savin-Williams, 2003). One participant could not even imagine meeting and telling his family face-to-face. The participant wrote letters to avoid the stress of being rejected in person. Coming out is seen as an important component in identity developmental theory (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Receiving favorable responses to coming out aids in a more positive development, whereas those that do not receive a positive response from others especially parents, tends to increase adverse psychological outcomes (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). When some participants told their parents, there were different types of reaction from “get out the house and don’t come back” to “we will help you get fixed.” Some of the participants were outted by siblings, “friends,” or supposedly confidential helpers. This made it even more difficult to have that first conversation. One participant recalled the following in their coming out experience with family:

“I was taught as a young person that singing with musical instruments in church was wrong—a sin. When I was older in college I was studying the Bible and biblical languages and came to the belief that using musical instruments in church was not wrong. I was home on break after that and told my parents that I now believed that it was not wrong to sing with instruments. That rocked my parents. My dad looked at me and said, ‘It would only be worse if you were going out at night and murdering people, or if you were gay.’ A few months later after graduation, I told my parents I was gay. I left home and have not been back.”

Etengoff and Daiute (2014) found that some family members tend to use religious tools (e.g., God, Bible, other religious texts) to show the LGBT family member they are wrong, while others use the same tools and find ways to show support of the LGBT family member. Heatherington and Lavner (2008) have a good review and recommendations for family systems to come to terms with coming out.

*School:* Coming out at school whether Middle School, High School, or College can be a dangerous choice for those in the LGBT communities. Evans and Chapman (2014) studied over 3,000 students with a model that included different types of bullying. Students that identified as LGBT received bullying from all the different types of bullying identified, especially *biased-based bullying* (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). Rivers (2004) studied adults that were out of school and university and found that many of those participating in the study reported that they still dealt with memories of being bullied by using drugs and alcohol. Seventeen percent of the sample exhibited PTSD symptoms.

Of the 25 people interviewed in this investigation, only five of them came out in High School. Being victims in school was not mentioned by them in any of our meetings together as a traumatic event. Ten of the participants came out in college, most by choice but a couple were outted by “friends” or confidants. The remaining participants in the sample came out as adults after college. Only one person in this sample has not come out to family. With this particular sample, there were not any war stories of getting beat up or persecuted in High School or University. This may speak well of the tolerance of Millennial students in the 2000’s and better diversity programs in schools (<http://www.naspcenter.org/principals/nassp_glbqt.html>). Better awareness on university campuses may contribute to better understanding, with over 200 universities in the United States that have a staffed LGBT center on campus (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). However, it is well documented that even if there is not outward physical and emotional abuse with LGBT students, many still have to deal with other stressors such as internalized homophobia (also called internalized sexual stigma) (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009).

*Work:* In an older review, Croteau (1996) reported that between 25% and 66% of LGBT employees reported experiencing sexual orientation discrimination at work. The fear of full disclosure in the workplace is common among LGBT communities and not easily resolved (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). Griffith and Hebl (2002) suggest having corporate policies in place and continual diversity training to ease the stress that LGBT employees and potential employees feel in the workplace. Not counting participants that are still students, all other participants are employed. One participant shared their story of being fired from a “Christian” organization when they found out from someone outside the organization that the participant was married to someone not of the opposite sex. Two participants had to retool for new careers because of not being allowed to be out and be ministers in churches of Christ. While many organizations are more LGBT friendly, working for churches of Christ and most mainline protestant churches is not an option.

*Church:* Coming out in churches of Christ ensures that one will not be a member of that fellowship for long, as evidenced in this investigation (three of the participant’s parents were ministers). Twenty-two of the 25 participants grew up in churches of Christ, with only two of those currently attending a church of Christ. It must be noted here that more studies need to be done on individual fellowships (e.g., Church of Christ, Baptist, Church of God, Seventh Day Adventist) to determine if leaving these fellowships was caused by sexual orientation alone. Kinnaman (2011, reprint 2016) does a commendable job in his study of Millennials as church dropouts. His research surfaced six major reasons why Millennials are leaving mainline church fellowships (one reason being homophobia). Most of the participants that left by choice were not happy about leaving the church of Christ. One participant said, “I am not embittered, I am heartbroken. So many of us cannot be a part of our Tribe that we grew up in.” Older participants shared mixed feelings about their church situation. One participant has come to see church as a “weapon” used against people. This participant shared the following about how church should be:

“I shared how gay bars made me know I wasn't alone and that if you got through the hatred getting to a bar it felt like a safe zone once inside. With that said, it would be so much better to have people feel they could go to a safe place/community that didn't involve the bad things that are associated with bar experiences like sex, drugs and alcohol. These things can often lead people down paths that impact them for a lifetime. Many community centers or other safe spaces are located in a "gay" neighborhood you would visit during the daytime. If someone wasn't out and got caught visiting such a place, it could have negative consequences. Wouldn't it be great if the church could serve that purpose? The church should bring ALL people together and not just select groups.”

While there are churches/church members working toward a better understanding of the LGBT communities (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007), the Pew Research Center reports 37% of North Americans are still adamantly opposed to issues such as same-sex marriage, and homosexuality in general (Fingerhut, 2016). *Christianity Today* a popular evangelical magazine called for “A Better Conversation About Homosexuality” (Benson, 2012):

“Just at the point of exhaustion and irritability, when we think the debate on homosexuality in the church has reached its end—with every position articulated, every line drawn in the sand, every constituency ghettoized—other voices emerge to remind us that the conversation *must* proceed. Despite anxiety for ourselves and the church, the conversation must proceed because God has called us to this annoyance as he has called previous generations of Christians to other annoyances; the interpretation of Scripture requires us to think deeply and wait patiently upon God; the shalom of the church is at risk if we close down the search for agreement; and, lest we forget, some of God’s precious children live upon the rack.”

**Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research**

I asked participants “What do most churches need to know as to how to engage the LGBT communities?” Some of the respondents interviews were filled with “what the church should do” comments below:

***O8: What churches need to know.***

-Don't be hesitant to talk about the subject. Be open-minded. Most of all--LOVE

-Listen to us (5X)

-Don’t mistreat my children

-Treat us like you would want to be treated

-Hear our stories (2X)

-Walk with us (2X)

-Churches should be a safe space

-Take a stand, do the right thing, even if not popular

-We are not bad people. Stumble along with us on this journey.

-Teach Love, Grace, Walk with us.

-Ignorance is a tool people use to not have to address the tough issues. There is a Void of Silence where the important, hard conversations are not happening. Don't make us Exiles. Stop using faith to keep bigotry and hate alive.

-Stop the rhetoric. Stem the hatred.

-Church is a great support group. We all need that.

-Hypocrites

The church of today must improve, to imitate its founder. This study is another reminder that we fall short of “Love God, Love Others,” even with our own people, much less with the rest of humanity. The limitations of this investigation include the sample. Future samples should include more ethnicity, greater age range, and a greater variety of representation in what we try to define at LGBT. Another purposeful limitation was focusing on one denomination of church fellowships. Future comparisons should include others (i.e., Protestant, Catholic, Muslim). It would be interesting to interview people from “all-gay” churches to investigate any prejudices within those churches (i.e., LGB vs. T). Perhaps a mixed methods approach based off this study would help future studies to access more data for a better understanding of this population and their lives.

**Appendix A**

**Interview Questions**

1. How were you introduced to church?

a. born into the church from birth

b. converted to church as a teen

c. converted to church as an adult.

2. Tell me about your church experience.

3. If experience was bad, what are you doing for church now?

4. If experience was/is good, what makes it that way? Why do you stay?

5. Are you allowed to teach or be in any type of leadership position? Explain.

6. If the answer to 5 is “no”, once again, why do you stay?

7. Would you talk about how you “came out” to your family and what the results of that was like.

8. In your opinion, what do most churches need to know about how to engage with the LGBT community?

9. Any closing thoughts, pet peeves, soapboxes?

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