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"I Became Proud of Being Gay and Proud of Being Christian": Faith Experiences of Queer Christian Women

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Queer Christian Women

Submitted by Rachel Murr
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MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St.
Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul,
Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with
basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research
problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the
university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their
findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Introduction

Involvement in religious communities is associated with many physical, social, mental and emotional benefits. Religious people report better health, more energy, and better relationships (Deaton, 2009). Religious people were also more likely to report that they are treated with respect. Religious involvement has also been found to lessen the impact of negative experiences such as poverty, depression, physical illness and even trauma (Bradshaw and Ellison, 2010; Farley, 2007; Jeongim Heo & Koeske, 2010). Frequently lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) people of faith are denied these benefits of religious involvement.

LGBTQ individuals face many obstacles to involvement in faith communities. Many have had experiences of shaming, ostracism, judgment, silencing, and removal from leadership positions or the entire community. Others have been referred to counseling or self-help groups designed to heal them of their "damaged" or "sinful" sexuality (Morrow, 2003). Research indicates that these experiences in faith communities or elsewhere can be very damaging to the individuals involved, leading to an increased risk of depression, self-harm, anxiety, and suicide (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Pitt, 2010).

Previous research (Morrow, 2003; Pitt, 2010) has found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of faith in non-affirming environments have four options in working out the sexual and spiritual conflict. The first is to reject their sexuality, which may include denial of unwanted attractions, abstinence, or even seeking out reparative therapies. The second option is to reject their faith and leave the community. Third, some choose to compartmentalize their two selves by being quiet about their sexuality at church and

being open in other environments. The fourth option involves an attempt to integrate

their sexual and spiritual selves. There is some debate about which options are the most

adaptive. Some claim that rejecting the religious identity is empowering and necessary

(Ison, Saltzburg, & Bledsoe, 2010; Morrow, 2003). Others argue that integration of the

spiritual and sexual identities is the most productive choice, leading people toward a

fulfilling personal and spiritual life (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Wagner, 1994).

The number of congregations that have adopted a fully affirming stance towards

LGBTQ people has grown dramatically in recent years. Thousands of congregations

have rallied together to support LGBTQ equity (Lindsay & Stern, 2006). Minnesota

alone has over one hundred churches that are considered welcoming communities

(OutFront Minnesota, 2011). Still these affirming communities are in the minority

(Marin, 2011). Even though over 60% of lesbians and gay men report that religion is no

longer an important part of other lives, most place importance on both their spiritual and

sexual identities (Sherry, et al, 2010). Most communities still hold a non-affirming

stance, believing that homosexual activity is sinful, or at least less than God's plan. This

leaves LGBTQ people with significant spiritual and community conflict to work out.

Social workers have maintained that the spiritual life of our clients should not be

ignored or downplayed. The profession acknowledges the importance of the emotional,

physical, social, vocational, and *spiritual* selves, and seeks to address these issues with

our clients. Many LGBTQ teens have indicated that mental health professionals were not

equipped to help them in their process of coming out, and the teens frequently had to

educate their mental health professionals about issues specific to LGBTQ health and

mental health (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009). Greater understanding of the

experiences of LGBTQ people may help professionals to be more sensitive, knowledgeable, and helpful.

In any polarized political or religious issue, it is difficult for people on either side to understand the other. LGBTQ people of faith may find themselves in the middle of this debate, with loved ones on both sides. Non-religious practitioners may not understand the gravity of the decision to leave a congregation and may be insensitive to this difficult decision. More conservative religious practitioners may find it difficult to support LGBTQ clients in exploring their sexual identities. As social workers seek to become more culturally sensitive professionals, hearing the stories of others can be a profound tool in moving toward this goal.

Several studies have explored how gay men navigate faith and sexuality, and the factors involved in healthy integration into an affirming belief system (Miller, 2007; Pitt, 2010; Wagner, 1994). While studies exist that demonstrate the harmful effects that religious communities have had on lesbian well-being (Morrow, 2003; Shapiro, Rios, & Stewart, 2010), little research was found to explore how lesbians have adapted their faith into an affirming and rewarding spirituality, and if they have benefited from religious community.

This study will focus on the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women who've grown up in non-affirming Christian environments. Through qualitative interviews, stories will be gathered about experiences within congregations, the experience of coming out, and how participants' faith and spiritual practices have changed, adapted, and remained.

Literature Review

Benefits of Religious Involvement and Spirituality

Research has consistently shown that involvement in religious community provides many benefits for the participants. Deaton (2009) found that that religious people around the world report better health, more energy, and healthier social and personal lives. He found that they are more likely to have supportive friends and are more likely to be treated with respect. Similarly, spirituality has been strongly associated with resiliency among many groups including runaway homeless youth (Williams, 2004), people recovering from traumatic experiences (Farley, 2007), and those in poverty (Bradshaw & Ellison, 2010). Spiritual beliefs were found to lessen the psychological impact of these hardships, and promote positive beliefs about self and God.

Farley (2007) found that many clients who were healing from trauma were struggling with "existential issues related to the meaning of suffering, the nature of good and evil, [and] their own religious beliefs" (p.2).   There were similarities between traits associated with resiliency and spirituality. Resiliency is simply the ability to cope with distressing situations, or the ability to recover. Spirituality may provide some of these resilient behaviors and support the recovery process by

- "giving definition to who we are;

- providing a structure for understanding the world and events that occur;

- providing a mechanism to transcend events of this life;

- giving a frame of reference for understanding good and evil; and

- providing a mechanism for forgiveness" (Greene, 2002, pp 47-48).

Building on the model of resiliency in Wolin and Wolin's book *The Resilient Self* (1993), Farley (2007) links each of the traits of resiliency to traits found in religious and spiritual practice. The traits include insight, independence, establishing relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Spirituality may also aid in resiliency through a belief in divine intervention, use of prayer, and finding meaning or purpose in life (Williams, 2004). Practitioners may find that spirituality can be a helpful resource to their clients who have experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect.

Barriers to the Benefits of Faith Community

Affirming options are limited. The benefits of spirituality and religious involvement are widely acknowledged, yet most queer women face significant obstacles to experiencing these benefits. Most major religious doctrines have viewed same gender relationships as sinful or immoral (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010). Sherkat (2002) asserted that those who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, "have been criticized and rejected by nearly every major religious denomination in the United States" (p.315). Some of these denominations have since adopted an affirming stance. Still, "only a handful of the more than 2,500 American religious denominations . . . 'affirm' homosexuality as a valid and morally supportive lifestyle" (Sherkat, 2002, p.315). These numbers are changing quickly as a growing movement of Churches and faith organizations are working towards inclusion and affirmation (Lindsay & Stern, 2006).

Hostile religious environments. Within the many non-affirming communities, attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) people vary from tolerance to outright hatred. Despite the wide range of views among people of faith, religious involvement has been strongly associated with negative attitudes towards gay

men and lesbians (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick,

2010). This results in many communities where "gay bashing", or public ridicule of gay

people, is common and acceptable. Sherry and colleagues (2010) found that many gay

men and lesbians experienced oppression, trauma, blatant cruelty, abuse, and rejection.

Some were disowned from their families or banned from their communities or homes.

The messages of condemnation and disdain have come from community members,

family, and religious leaders (Morrow, 2003; Rodriguez, 2010; Sherry, et al., 2010).

Highly publicized religious homophobia. Some vocal conservative Christian

leaders have associated homosexuality with perceived moral decay of the western world,

blaming sexual minorities for natural disasters (Piper, 2009), acts of terror (Falwell &

Robertson, 2001), and economic decline (Kern, 2009). Christian leaders have used

several biblical passages to back their teaching that homosexuality is "unnatural", a

"perversion", and an "abomination" (Rodriguez, 2010). The most vocal opposition to the

gay rights movement seems to come from religious organizations or politicians who align

themselves with the religious right. It may be very difficult for queer women and men to

separate these messages from a more welcoming Christianity.

Resistance within queer communities. Within the LGBTQ community, lesbian

and bisexual women may face scrutiny for their involvement in faith communities.

Studies have found that anywhere from 60-69% of gay men and lesbians have left

organized religion (Morrow, 2003; Sherry, et al., 2010). Lesbians are less likely than gay

men to be commited to faith communities (Dahl & Galliher, 2009), so the number of

lesbians who have left their faith communities is likely even higher. One hypothesis is

that "lesbian or bisexual women's understanding of organized religion as an institutionalized patriarchal system" has turned them away (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p.94).

The culture of many LGBTQ communites may not be very supportive of faith practice. Sherry and colleagues (2010) assert that "it can be easier for som LGB people to come out as gay in their religious communities than it can be to come out as religious in their gay communities" (p.113). Many lesbians do not understand why another would want to be involved in an institution that rejects them. This leaves queer women of faith at odds with both religious and LGBTQ communities.

Impact of negative messages

Increase risk of mental health issues. The increased risk of mental health problems among LGBTQ populations can be understood through the minority stress model. This model suggests that minorities experience disproportionate levels of stress compared to the majority culture. This stress comes through (a) painful external events or conditions, (b) the expectation of more negative external events and the vigilence associated with these expectations, and (c) internalization of negative messages (Meyer, 2003). These chronic stressors within the social environment put adolescent sexual minorities at a higher risk of developing mental health disorders including depression, substance abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, and suicide (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke; 2009, Meyer, 2003). Compared with their siblings, GLBT youth are more likely to seek out mental health services. They are also more likely than their heterosexual siblings to attempt suicide and engage in self-harm (Davis, et al, 2009).

Teen suicide. The issue of teen suicide among LGBTQ youth has finally been gaining some of the press it has long deserved. Several examples of bullying and suicide

in the past years have brought more attention to an issue that is not at all new. Studies

indicate that gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens are 2-4 times more likely to attempt suicide

than are heterosexual teens (Suicide Prevention Resource Center [SPRC], 2008). While

4% of all young people have attempted suicide before the age of 20, the number of gay

and lesbian teens who have attempted suicide is as high as 30%-40% (SPRC, 2008, p.

15).

      Internalized homophobia. Another consequence of living in a heterosexist

society is the development of internialized homophobia, which refers to the negative

self-perception adopted by gay men and lesbians who have internalized the culture's

negative messages about themselves, resulting in a shame-based self-image of being

"flawed", "damaged", or otherwise "less-than" their heterosexual counterparts. This

phenomenon has been named one of the biggest barriers to the mental health and well

being of gay and lesbian people because of its association with guilt, depression, and

feelings of worthlessness (Wagner, 1994). Those who struggle with conflict between

religious and sexual identities are more likely to experience shame, internalized

homophobia, and suicidal ideation (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010).

      Family conflict and rejection. Another tragic result of negative religious

messages about lesbians and gay men is the breakup of families. When a young person

comes out to his or her parents it is often followed by shock, fear, disappointment, and

sadness (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009). Most parents have dreams for their child of

heterosexual marriage and production of grandchildren, so the discovery that the child is

gay can feel like a loss of these dreams. When the family holds conservative religious

views this conflict is compounded. Youth in these environments have experienced

family rejection, rejection from the home resulting in homelessness, and emotional and physical abuse (Davis, et. al, 2009; Morrow, 2003).

Culture war

Political and religious conflict in this country have created a great divide between religious and queer communities. While the attitudes of the general public are moving towards more acceptance and legal protection for sexual minorities (Avery, et al. 2007), many religious communtites have remained strictly opposed to any movement in this direction. Marin (2011) predicts that we are only at the beginning of a very ugly culture war between the LGBTQ community, and religious conservatives.

This ugly culture war seems to be about something entirely different than the love between two people. In her memoir, *Take this Bread: ARadical Conversion*, Sara Miles (2007) explains the conflict between churches well:

> It wasn't just about gayness, of course, but a more fundamental conflict between believers who craved certainty and those who embraced ambiguity; those who insisted Scripture was inerrant and unchanging, given one and for all time, and those who believed that the Bible was only part of God's continuing revelation. The struggle was also about how to define a Christian: as one who sought to keep the religion 'pure' or one who welcomed outcasts (p.88).

She asserts that those who want to hold onto tradition and preserve the purity of their movement must exclude all threats. LGBTQ people have come to represent what conservatives fear about losing their firmly held belief in the inerrancy of scripture. As a result, religious groups have come to represent hatred and bigotry to many in the LGBTQ

community. These cultural dynamics make it very difficult for queer Christians to navigate their own spirituality.

Conflicting Identities

Shapiro Rios, and Stewart (2010) found that lesbian sexual identity develops"alongside and entangled with" other identities including, cultural, racial, and spiritual. When these identities intersect harmoniously, it can lead to a sense of having different parts of an integrated whole. For those with conflict between religious and sexual identities, the result may be disintegration and inner turmoil. Many conservative Christian communities give the message that gay and Chrisitan are two mutually exclusive identities, creating a great deal of conflict for gay and lesbian Christians (Sherry, et al, 2010).

Two thirds of LGBTQ people report some degree of conflict between their sexual and spiritual selves (Dahl & Galliher, 2009). For many, the religious or spiritual identity is deeply meaningful and not easily abandoned. American culture is largely shaped by religious tradition and beliefs. Morrow (2003) puts it well when she states:

> People turn to their religious traditions for comfort and solace in times of trouble, and for celebration and validation in times of joy. For some, the very rhythm of their lives beats to the seasons of religious ritual and tradition (p. 118).

These traditions and practices impact many dimentions of people's lives including their very identity.

Meaningful community. In looking at the reasons queer women stay in non-affirming environments, insight may be gathered from a study of gay black men in church. Several factors were involved in continued religious involvement despite many

blatantly anti-gay messages within the church. Many of these men were so close to memebers of their religious community that they considered them extended family. In addition to the depth of relationships built within the community, each of the participants experienced "tangible encounters with God", and many took pride and enjoyment in serving in various church positions (Miller, 2007, pp 55-56). Though lesbians are less likely to stay involved in faith communities after coming out than are gay men (Dahl & Galliher, 2009), perhaps those who stay do so for the same reasons.

Rodreguez (2010) asks an important question to this study and to his own, "Why do gays and lesbians put themselves through such ordeals and try so hard to stay connected with a religion that rejects them? (p.7)" Many within the queer community do not understand the choice to stay involved in non-affirming communities. One central question to this study is whether or not the benefits outweigh the negative experiences. Rosario and colleagues (2006) studied religious involvement among gay and bisexual adolescents of both genders. They found that the health benefits of religious involvement remain for gay and bisexual adolescent males but not females. The study showed no relationship between religious identity and health factors for the young women involved. Why is it that queer women experience fewer protective benefits of religious involvement and leave their faith communities more often than queer men, while women as a whole are far more involved in religious community than men (Deaton, 2009)?

Choices Available to Queer Women of Faith

Previous research has found four distinct patterns that LGBTQ people of faith have chosen to reconcile their conflicting spiritual and sexual identities. These include rejection of homosexuality, rejection of religious practice, compartmentalization of the

two selves, and integration of homosexual and religious identities (Pitt, 2010; Morrow, 2003). Each of these choices is accompanied by varied health and social outcomes for individuals.   Some choices seem to be stages people pass through, and others seem to be a life-long choice. Rosario and colleagues (2006) found that the cognitive dissonance experienced for many queer people of faith is most frequently resolved through eventual rejection of religion or integrations of religious and queer identities.

     Denial of sexual identity, celibacy, and conversion therapy. For some queer women, leaving their faith community is simply not an option. For these women, the spiritual self is the "central organizing aspect of identity", and cannot be reliquished even if it means giving up the chance of finding an intimate partner (Sherry, et al, 2010).

     Some choose celibacy, attempt heterosexual relationships, or pray that God would change them. Still others pursue "conversion therapies" in which they seek to change their orientation to heterosexual (Borgman, 2009).   Implications can be drawn from Pitt's (2010) study of 34 gay black men. All of the participants reported some time in their lives when they tried to reject their homosexual feelings but ultimately found "trying to reject the homosexual identity a difficult and ultimately fruitless endeavor" (p.44). Queer women may have had similar experiences.

     Many facilities still exist that provide this "reparative therapy" or "conversion therapy" despite the absence of research that it is effective (Cates, 2007; Davis, et al, 2009). The American Psychological Association published a statement rejecting all therapeutic practices that claim to change one's sexual orientation. This statement was endorsed by over a dozen other health and education associations including American Federation of Teachers, American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Association

of Social Workers (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008). One former recipient of conversion

therapy said:

> My parents turned to our religion, southern Baptist, for 'help' to 'fix' me after I
>
> came out to them. This led to therapy with Christian psychologists, false
>
> literature about homosexuals, and conferences on homosexuality put on by the
>
> Christian Coalition. This led me to hate my religion and all those associated with
>
> it, as my experiences were very negative and emotionally degrading (Sherry, et al,
>
> 2010, p.116).

While there are some who claim to be 'ex-gay', purporting that they have changed their

orientation through therapy or prayer, most gay and lesbian individuals find the idea quite

dubious (Pitt, 2010) .

Some members of more conservative faiths have sought out "ex-gay" ministries

because of their sense of isolation from both religious and queer communities; they have

found these small support groups to be one of very few places where they feel welcomed

and accepted (Cates, 2007). The experiences are varied indeed, ranging from true

believers in conversion therapy to ex-ex-gay individuals, angry about their experiences.

Rejecting the religious identity. The option of rejecting religious practices or

identity is the most popular, chosen by more than 60% of queer women (Morrow, 2003;

Sherry, et al, 2010). It is frequently assumed this is the most adaptive choice due to

evidence that it may be harmful for gay and lesbian members to remain in their non-

affirming faith communities. Henrickson (2007) studied lesbian, gay, and bisexual

Christians in New Zealand, where participants reported that their religious tradition was

"more a difficulty than a support" to them.   Those without religious affiliation

experienced more familial support and were significantly happier with their sexual identity than were Christian respondents. Ison, Saltzburg and Bledsoe (2010) questioned same-sex attracted current and former members of the Morman church, finding that there is a slightly positive association between leaving the church and improved self-esteem. Some queer women may find the experience of separating themselves from hostile religious institutions to be empowering (Morrow, 2003). Sherry and colleagues (2010) assert that "rejecting traditional religious institutions allows LGB people the freedom to reflect and construct an individualized spiritual self" (p. 113).

Rejecting religious structures may be essential for healing the trauma inflicted by homophobic communities. Nietzsche (as cited in Ison and colleagues, 2010) taught that oppressed people can be free from internalized oppression by first questioning the authority of the dominant group and second, experiencing a change in values. A Nietzschean perspective could help the client to reject the authority of their religious institution, cease participation, and then construct their own value system that is free from the constraints of the institution (Ison, Saltzburg, & Bledsoe, 2010). Rejecting the religious identity may bring about a sense of empowerment, safety, and improved self-concept for many.

For others, this loss seems more tragic. One Christian stated, "I've lost my faith. It seems hopeless to me. Why should I go to church and worship a God when I'm going to hell anyway?" (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p.104). Another young person laments, "religion has been my main support for the first 19 years of my life and I feel like my own personal foundation has been shattered because of the rejection" (Sherry, et al, 2010,

p. 116). Whether a person walks away feeling empowered or defeated, leaving one's

faith is often associated with grief and loss.

Ream and Savin-Williams' study of Christian LGBTQ youth (as quoted in Dahl

& Galliher, 2009) showed that those who left the church because of the conflict they

experience exhibited lower levels of internalized homophobia than those who stayed

involved. Those who left their religious communities also exhibited lower levels of

general mental health. Presumably they did not internalized negative messages about

themselves, but suffered nontheless. It is not known whether the suffering they

experienced arose out of the trauma of past religious experiences or out of the loss of

their religious communities.

Compartmentalizing two identities. Of those who experience a great deal of

conflict between religious and sexual identities, some choose to keep these two pieces of

themselves separate, pretending to be straight within their faith communities and being

openly gay, lesbian or bisexual in their personal lives. This method is frequently

associated with guilt, frustration, or feelings of isolation (Dahl & Galliher, 2009).

Marshall (2009) gives the case example of Sarah, a young Asian-American Christian who

is secretly involved in an intimate relationship with another woman. Sarah believes that

she would no longer be welcome at her church if she were to be open about this

relationship. She continues her involvement in the church, but "she feels alone as she

worships" (p.428).

One adolescent explained, "When I'm in the religious part of my life, it's like I

just don't have sexuality. That's the only way it ever worked" (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p.

103). Another explains "[I] continue to participate in weekly services. . . [and] do a few

volunteer activities, but feel that if the others knew I am gay, that I would not be accepted and in fact thrown out and never invited back" (Sherry, et al, 2010, p. 116). One woman describes her experience with compartmentalizing:

> I was in the process of coming out as a lesbian and then I'd go back in as a born-again Christian. . . In one circle you talked about brotherhood, in the other one you talked about sisterhood. . . so I sort of did this back-and-forth between coming out as a lesbian in college, which was . . . sort of the sound of one had clapping. . . (Shapiro, Rios, & Stewart, 2010, p. 97).

Her perspective was clearly that she could not be both lesbian and Christian. Her perspective is not uncommon, and one that leaves many who live between religious and queer communities feeling conflicted and alone.

When queer women are in environments in which they feel they cannot talk about issues related to their sexual orientation, they are more likely to experience internalized homophobia and other negative health outcomes (Lewis, Derlega, Clarke, & Kuang, 2006). Additionally, high 'stigma consciousness', or the expectation of judgement from those around them, can result in more negative mental health outcomes (Lewis, et al, 2006). Many faith communities create environments where queer women quite accurately expect judgement from those around them, and they may suffer as a result, experiencing more feelings of isolation, and self-reproach.

Integrating sexual and spiritual identities. The final option available to queer women of faith is to find ways to integrate their spiritual and sexual identities. This typically involves adapting their faith in beliefs, practice, or choice of community. Many have argued that integration of spiritual and sexual identities is the most adaptive choice,

leading to decreased internalized homophobia, and the continuation of a rich and meaningful spiritual life (Marshall, 2009; Rodriguez, 2010; Wagner, 1994). One young Christian stated:

> I just know that God made me how I am and I accept myself. . . . Christians, not Christ, are the ones that caused my conflict. My religious and spiritual identities have finally come back together after realizing that their beliefs are not mine and hold no power in my life (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p. 103).

Another example of the positive benefits of spiritual practice for LGBTQ individuals is found in Sara Miles' (2007) memoir. She asks a friend how he managed to stick with Christianity when so many wanted to kick him out for being gay. He responded, "Honey, I know who my shepherd is" (p.241). She has used the same line in a lecture when asked how she handles Christians who judge her for being lesbian (Miles, 2011). Perhaps this intimate kind of spirituality could be a strong buffer against religious messages of hate.

Integration of the spiritual and sexual identities is a process, frequently viewed as a spiritual journey. This journey typically begins with internal questioning of one's religious beliefs, reintegration of religious and queer identities (through reading literature or finding others with similar experiences), and reclaiming faith through supportive community (Rodriguez, 2010). Reclaiming can occur through finding affirming communities where LGBTQ women and men are welcomed and encouraged to take an active role in the community.

Others adopt as spiritual-but-not-religious approach, avoiding organized religion but holding onto personal beliefs or practices. Some stay in their communities and try to live out the conflict.

As indicated above, there has been a wealth of research on the LGBTQ spirituality and the negative impact of condemning religious messages. Ample research indicates the harm inflicted on adolescents growing up in a heterosexist society. Several studies have been cited to explain how gay men have successfully integrated spiritual and sexual identities. Still little research was found specific to lesbian faith experiences that resulted in positive integration. Clear reasons were not found for queer women's disproportionate exodus from faith communities compared to gay men. This study seeks to find out more about the experiences of queer women in non-affirming environments, why they are more likely to leave their faith communities, and what barriers existed. It also seeks to learn from their "spiritual journey" how they moved toward a spiritual life that is enriching and meaningful.

<div align="center">**Conceptual Framework**</div>

Critical Theory

Critical theory plays an important role in understanding the injustices faced by any minority or oppressed group. This study is grounded in the belief that powerful social and religious structures have rejected, silenced, and oppressed LGBTQ people, resulting in incalculable harm, including increased risk for depression, PTSD, anxiety, and suicide (Davis, et al, 2009). Critical theorists posit that privileged power structures create culture, institutions, and laws that favor them, while minority groups are oppressed. They suggest that the structural change that is necessary for equality can only occur when the oppressed people are empowered (Forte, 2007).

Some feminist critical theorists add that oppression can come in the form of silencing, while empowerment can occur through finding one's voice and telling one's

story (McNamara, 2009). Shapiro and colleauges (2010) found a strong theme of

silencing in the experiences of lesbian women. Her study included four lesbian scholar-

activists of different nationalities who had found their voice and advocated for social

change. Still, their experiences of being silenced remained fresh in their memories.

Similarly, the experience of coming out is frequently considered an empowering event

because it gives voice to what is true of oneself. Giving voice to one's sexual orientation

and one's spirituality may be an important step for those wrestling with conflicting

identities. This study builds on the belief that many Christian Churches have defined

healthy sexuality in a way that excludes and shames queer people, labeling them as

disordered. The interviews will explore how queer women have experienced silencing,

oppression, and discrimination because of religious power structures. Critical theory is

grounded in the goal of empowering the marginalized. Empowerment can come in many

ways, including telling one's story, challenging the message of the authority, or rejecting

the authority itself.

Symbolic Interactionism

Internalized homophobia and other health problems among queer women can be

understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This theory states that humans

develop their own self-concept through the reflection of others (Forte, 2007). When a

child perceives that her parents think she is odd or defective, she will begin to believe

these things are true about her. When a faith community teaches that it is not okay to

love someone of the same gender, girls becoming aware of their own sexual preference

will likely develop feelings of inferiority, guilt, or shame. Faith communities have the

potential to reflect back very positive messages to their members. Christian teachings

align with this theory in the belief that God's love can be revealed through others, and people can better understand God's love for them through the love and welcome of their faith community.

The flip side is that if families and faith communities treat LGBTQ people with disdain, judgment, and rejection, then young people growing aware of their same-gender attractions will develop a negative self-concept that will be difficult to overcome. Additionally, when these messages come from a faith community it is difficult for young people to avoid the belief that God thinks very poorly of them.

Symbolic interactionists look at humans as members. Members of humanity, family, social, educational, or special interest groups, and large scale groups that can be divided by gender, race, or religion. Interactionism focuses strongly on interpersonal relationships and communication to created shared meaning. It credits humans with the power to determine their own destiny, to determine what is best for them, and to overcome great obstacles – with the help of others. It emphasizes the importance of finding supportive community that can communicate affirming, loving, and welcoming messages, as well as fight for social change together (Forte, 2007).

Personal Experience

More than any theology or theory on human behavior, my research lens is shaped by personal experience as a lesbian Christian. I spent ten years in an Evangelical Christian environment, knowing I was attracted to women, but believing that God didn't want me to love them. I read many materials put out by ex-gay ministries and am familiar with their claims. My view changed when I saw the unhealth of my own life and the lives of a handful of other lesbian women who were trying to deny their sexuality, but

living misery. My Christian experience is filled with incredibly enriching and rewarding

experiences of God and community, as well as frustration, anger, and isolation. I am

looking to critically examine the message that lesbian and Christian are incompatible

identities. I believe that those who experience societal oppression and injustice could

find resilience through meaningful spirituality.

Methods

This study sought to capture the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women

who've grown up in non-affirming Christian environments. Through qualitative

interviews, participants were asked about early faith development, early religious culture,

coming out, and adaptation of beliefs to an affirming spirituality. The researcher sought

to find recurrent themes through the interviews that speak to the experiences of this

population.

Data collection

Data was gathered through eight qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by researcher. Interviews were typically

held at coffee shops with two exceptions: one phone interview and one interview held at

a participant's home. Interview questions were organized to follow a timeline of: early

faith development, early religious culture, coming out, and eventual development of

affirming faith.

Participants

Participants were sought out who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual women who

have spent time in non-affirming Christian environments and have adapted their faith to

one that is affirming and rewarding. Subjects were found through snowball sampling,

starting with the researcher's social connections, and asking participants if they know of others who meet the criteria and may have an interest in participating in the study. Efforts were made to gather a diverse range of women from different Christian denominations, ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds within the Midwest.

While race was not one of the interview questions, participants identified as Latino (1), Mexican (1), black or bi-racial, (1), and white (5). The participants had a wide range of experiences in different denominations and church cultures including Lutheran, Baptist (predominantly black), charismatic (predominantly white), Puerto Rican Pentecostal, evangelical Minnesotans, and Catholic (including Latino, white, and racially diverse communities). Participants ranged in age from early twenties to early fifties. Two identified as bisexual, one was married to a man, and the other was partnered to a woman who transitioned to man and they are now married. Another participant consistently identified as lesbian, though her current partner is male and they are raising a child together. One participant rejected the labels of lesbian or bisexual not feeling like either term described her ability to love either gender. The four remaining participants identified as lesbian (see figure 1).

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded, or searched for themes that repeat across interviews. Transcripts were coded again by a peer, who is an IRB research professional, to gather themes that may have been missed by researcher. Data analysis involved allowing themes to emerge from the interviews through a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory states that meaning can be drawn out of the data rather than from existing theories or hypotheses; it involves a "continual interplay between data

Participants and their Christian Experiences

Participant	Race	Orientation	Denominational experiences
P1	Caucasian	Bisexual	Catholic, Evangelical
P2	Mexican-American	Doesn't like to be labeled	Evangelical - English and Spanish ministries
P3	Caucasian	Identified as lesbian, currently in a relationship with a man	Catholic, non-denominational home church, twelve step group
P4	Caucasian	Lesbian	Evangelical, Charismatic, UCC
P5	Caucasian	Bisexual	progressive Catholic communities
P6	Biracial	Lesbian	Latino Catholic, Lutheran, Black Baptist, Pentecostal
P7	Biracial	Lesbian	predominantly white and predominantly black charismatic communities
P8	Caucasian	Lesbian	Catholic, married into 'brutal' Evangelical family

Figure 1.

collection, data analysis and theory development" (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011, p.225). Interviews were gathered to discover common experiences of lesbian and bisexual Christian women through their own words. As themes were discovered across interviews, new theories emerged and implications for social work practice were drawn.

Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to contact with any interview subjects. Consent forms (see Appendix B) were emailed to participants for review prior to the interview and a signed copy was gathered at the start of each interview. Subjects were asked additional questions to gauge their understanding of the informed consent process. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the subjects, only the researcher had access to the names and other identifying information. Audio files were stored on a personal computer located in the researcher's secured home until they were fully transcribed, at which point recordings

were deleted. Identifying information was removed from all the transcripts which will be saved indefinitely. Consent forms were stored in a private file in the researcher's secured apartment until July 30, 2012, when they will be destroyed.

Given that local queer community is small and researcher was likely to come in contact with participants in the future, participants were given the opportunity to ask the researcher questions about her own faith experiences in order to reduce any power differential that could occur from one-sided knowledge.

Findings

Themes emerged in alignment with critical theory in that participants shared examples of how they experienced oppression at the hands of the religious power structures of their communities. Feminist theories addressing silencing and finding one's voice or power also seemed very relevant. Themes have been organized to begin with the negative and oppressive experiences participants faced, and then how participants have found empowerment, growth, or transformation.

Negative Experiences

Experiences of oppression, discrimination, and judgment came from the church, the family, and society at large. Themes emerged in categories of early formative messages, rejections from churches and families, reparative therapy claims, internalization of negative messages, and silencing. All of the participants experienced very damaging oppressive messages. For some participants, these messages came very early and were integrated into their Christian belief system. For others, there was an unspoken understanding that being lesbian was not ok.

Early Messages. Some condemning messages about LGBTQ people were quite blatant. One woman (P4) explained about her charismatic church, "*I heard very consistently from the pulpit, any example of someone who is a sinner or sinful or bad -- the epitome of the example was usually a gay person.*" Another (P2) explained about her evangelical environment, "*Just growing up in the church, we were always taught that homosexuality was a sin, and not only was it a sin it was a sexual sin*". These statements seem to illustrate how homosexuality was considered a sin that was worse than other sins. A young woman (P6) who spent three years homeless after being kicked out of her home described her Minnesota Lutheran church environment:

> *They were like, "homosexuality is a sickness… it's a disease in your life and it will destroy America". I mean, very clear, and that's pretty powerful; like, "It will destroy America!" you know?*

She goes on to explain how she heard anti-gay messages from preachers across several denominations and locations:

> *Definitely in Puerto Rico with the Pentecostal church, absolutely that was something that [was preached from the pulpit]. . . Yeah, that it was a disgusting thing and you are going to Hell. And a lot of the Baptist Churches that I went to [in Minnesota] -- same message.*

One Catholic participant (P5) had the experience of seeing the Father of her small ex-Catholic church on television, speaking up for gay rights and coming out as a gay man in the late 1960s. She said, "*I was little, so I don't really totally remember it. What I remember was my dad being disgusted. That's what I remember.*" She also remembered that they did not continue to go to that church, and never saw him again.

Condemning messages did not only come from the pulpit, but from the entire community. A twenty-nine year old woman who grew up in several different church environments (P7) explained:

I grew up in churches that definitely do not condone homosexuality to a point

where, you know, some of the churches and some of the people that I loved and

cared for would go out of their way to really be bigots! And kind of propagate

that bigotry using religion, which I think is really . . . it's really hard.

At other times, the message was not outright condemning, but was one of not acknowledging LGBTQ people. A young woman who grew up in a Catholic Church in California (P8) explained the silence around LGBTQ issues, *"It really honestly was not talked about when I was young. It wasn't a bad thing or a good thing, it just didn't exist almost."*

For those communities that did address homosexuality from the pulpit, many of them promoted change, healing, or reparative therapy. One woman remembers' her pastor's stance of 'welcome' towards LGBTQ people, summarized as, *"They can come into the church and I'll give them therapy."*

Claims About Change. Several participants spoke of reparative therapy - either knowing they would be sent there against their will as teenagers, or actually taking part in trying to heal from their same gender attractions. Reparative therapy is based on the assumption that same-gender attractions arise out of damage to one's sexuality that can be healed. One woman (P4) spoke of her experience in reparative therapy:

The only thing that [the therapist] did was talk about self-discipline. The only

advice he had was, "you need to take every thought captive." That was his

corner Scripture. He gave me books about self-control, and mind control, and

discipline, and things like that to try to help me. I stopped going to him after

about four or five months because it was very. . . One, I felt very bad every time I

went there even though he was very compassionate. I felt very bad, and I felt very

dirty. And I couldn't, as hard as I tried, I felt like I could never really fully

overcome it.

She had also been meeting with her pastor and his wife as well as the therapist to help her

with her unwanted attractions to other women. Shortly thereafter she began to embrace

her lesbian identity. Though never a part of reparative therapy, another woman (P6)

explained her attempts to change; "*I did try for many, many, years – unsuccessfully, to be*

straight. Just to try to live right -- according to what they were preaching. But, you know,

it didn't work out. (laughing.) Thank God!"

Another woman (P3) was kicked out of her parent's house after coming out at age

20. She spoke about what might have happened if she had come out earlier; "*I knew I*

couldn't say anything because I knew what was gonna happen. . . If I had been under my

parents' guardianship I would've been with Michele Bachman's husband. (laughs) It

just would've been bad." (Michele Bachman's husband owns a local mental health clinic

that is known to provide reparative therapy.)

The prevalence of the belief in reparative therapy among religious leaders was

observed by another participant who attended a local summit to discuss how faith

communities can be involved in reducing instances of bullying of LGBTQ teens. She

expressed her disappointment at the comments of several faith leaders:

I mean, they verbally talked about if [an LGBTQ person] would come to them

seeking help or resources that they would not give them any type of community

resources where they could go to talk to, or anything about PFLAG.   It would be

to rid themselves of this sin, or reparative therapy. So that was disappointing.

All of the participants who mentioned reparative therapy spoke very negatively of this

practice. Those who attempted change looked back at that attempt as futile and

misguided.

      Rejection from Church. All of the participants had some negative experiences

with churches. These experiences ranged from being kicked out of the community, being

denied various opportunities, or being told that they were sinning or going to Hell. Two

of the participants came out to their pastors directly. The participant who attempted

reparative therapy (P4) explained her experience of coming out in her

evangelical/charismatic church:

I knew that as soon as I finished school I was going to come out, and that I would

have to leave the church. And that instead of enduring the pain of having them

reject me, and having to experience the glares or the stares and the rumors or the

whispers, I confronted it head on with my pastor . . . And he's like, "no you can't...

You can't be in ministry; you can come and be in worship, you can be involved in

the church, but you can't be involved with the kids and you can't be involved in

leadership, as long as you say that . . . you're going to actively pursue your gay

identity or your homosexuality."

One of the participants (P6) converted to Baptist during her years of homelessness after she was kicked out of her home for being discovered as lesbian. She described her experience there:

> *I talked to the pastor when I first came out. When I first was saved, and he was like, 'you need to be celibate,' and I said 'okay'. You know, 'I'll do that'. And one day, this girl sort of gave me a kiss, but it was like a friend thing it wasn't anything… because I had really been sticking to it. And the pastor had seen [the kiss]. . . And he was so angry, and I was trying to explain, you know, it wasn't like that. And he just wasn't hearing any of it. He was like, "no, you can't. . . you can't. . . we don't do that, and you can't come back here."*

So she left the church and questioned her faith for years to follow.

Others experienced rejection from their churches through community members. Several had the experience of other Christians telling them condescendingly, "*I'm praying for you every day*", *or "Aw, honey I just pray for you!"* One relative tried to explain her position by saying, "*You just have to understand honey, Christians just think it's a sin."* Another participant was living in a shared house with a community of other Christians when, "*one of the community members expressly stated that he would not feel comfortable living with a gay person."* She opted not to come out to that community.

One woman (P3) knew that her old church would not be a safe place to return after coming out. Several years later she ran into the daughter of one of the leaders of her old church – a church she described as '*scary*', '*radical*', and '*scarring*', with some very bizarre teachings. She described this encounter:

Her dad had died, her mom had just died, and she actually asked if we could get

together and hang out for coffee. And I was like, 'okay' . . . and she pretty much

just told me that there's no sense in me being alive right now if I'm just gonna

keep living this way because I'm gonna go to Hell. And that was like – crash. I

crashed really bad[ly] after that.

It seems as if she had held out some hope that this friend from her past might have

changed or might have abandoned some of the messages and tactics of the old church, or

might have been looking to connect with people after the death of her parents. She

experienced the invitation as a ploy her old friend used to speak judgment and

condemnation.

Some experienced rejection through the loss of relationships without overt

conflict. One participant (P7) said, "*I wouldn't say that I did come out to those people in*

my community. . . I think they just found out, and decided to sever ties". She explained

that they, "*. . . made it very clear in terms of like, not returning texts or phone calls, that I*

kind of got the hint."

In addition to experiences of getting kicked out of church or experiencing the

judgment of others, some participants shared how they were denied opportunities for

leadership, membership, and marriage. One participant (P4) was nearly kicked out of her

Christian College just months before graduation. She was called into the office of the

Dean of Women for being suspected of being lesbian. She was told, *". . . others have*

pointed you out to me. Even some of the teachers have questioned whether or not maybe

you are gay by the way you are -- by the way you dress or the way you talk or walk."

She had been committed to celibacy and seeking reparative therapy at the time, and still was nearly denied her diploma and kicked out months prior to graduation.

One participant (P5) was in a relationship with a woman who later transitioned to male. Although they had found a very welcoming Catholic church she was uncertain if she'd be able to get married there. She said, "*I didn't know what the church had to say about transgender. And my initial thought was: they probably haven't gotten around to condemning transgender people yet, so we could probably get married.*" She had to do some research to find an answer, but when she did, she found the church's position that:

> *if you have a transgender transition, that is evidence of mental instability because you really can only be the body you appear to be when you were born, and if you're mentally unstable then of course you're not fit to be married. . .*

She described her response to hearing that her marriage would not be recognized by her church:

> *So, when I found that out it was devastating. It was . . . it was. . . I mean, I cannot tell you how painful it was. I could not set my foot back at [my church]. Even though, like I said, they would've been . . ., it wasn't about them; it was about the fact that this church community that I've been a part of for 20 years - I would not be able to be married there. This was my community, this was my faith community and I was a regular church goer for 20 years there. I mean, it was devastating.*

These examples indicate how frequently participants experienced rejection, and how it was experienced in a wide variety of church cultures. In addition to these negative church experiences, many participants also experienced rejection from their families.

Family Rejection. All of the participants expressed some fear or hesitation about coming out to their families. Seven of the eight participants shared experiences of family disapproval, rejection, or cruelty. One woman (P2) decided to tell her mom about the relationship she'd been in for the past year. Her mom's response was that, "*she said she knew, and that she would pray every day that we would break up - that God would break us up; that it wasn't right.*" Another woman (P8)'s mother pretended not to understand when she came out to her. She recalls the conversation: "*She was like, 'What? I don't understand.' And I was like, 'Mom, you know what I'm talking about!'*" Her mother eventually became very supportive. Just when she was gaining the acceptance of her mother, she was introduced to her partner's family -- "*Evangelical Minnesotans are… they're brutal! They're harsh. I could tell you some stories on what we've experienced with them!*" She told several stories of how her wife's family treated them. She recalled, "*when [my wife] and I first decided to get married we told her parents, and we had this huge conversation about the Bible, and how it's wrong. . . and Leviticus. . . and I mean, I'm serious!*" Soon after, the extended family got involved. She said, "*Her one aunt sent us two pages, single spaced, typed letter on how the devil has our soul, and.. . a bunch of just outrageous, to me, religious beliefs.*"

The most drastic form of family rejection was the ending of relationships. Three of the eight participants faced a period of time when their parent(s) completely cut ties with them after being "found out" as lesbian. One woman (P6) was physically attacked and then kicked out of her home. She recalled, "*Yeah, they found out that I was gay and they were like "You gotta go." And so from 16 to 19 I was homeless.*"

Another participant (P3) was kicked out at age 20. The third (P7) was already living on her own when her mother refused to see or talk to her. She explained her attempts to make contact with her mother after being suspected of being lesbian:

So I called her up. I kept calling and calling and calling. It took a few days before she'd answer my call and [she asked], 'Do you have something you need to tell me?' . . . I came out to her, [and] then I didn't hear from her for a few weeks. So I wrote a letter and I didn't hear from her for a very long time, and then there was an e-mail that basically said, 'I can forgive you if you choose to acknowledge that this is a sin and seek forgiveness and healing.' And I called her and left a message that that was not possible.

Eventually they were able to have a conversation on her mother's doorstep, because she was not allowed inside her mother's house. She described that conversation, saying, "*She just said some hurtful things, and after that there was kind of an excommunication of a couple years.*"

One young woman (P3)'s mother seemed to be taking a preemptive strike against her orientation:

My mom started asking me if I was gay when I was 16. . . And, you know, my response was usually a really quick, "No, why would you think that? No!" And then occasionally [she would say], 'You know, lesbians burn in Hell.' And just stuff like that. It was really, really harsh.

Years later, the conversation went a little differently. She remembered:

And one day my mom asked me if I was a lesbian, and I said, 'Well, what would you do if I said yes?' And that was actually really traumatic, because I got kicked

out of the house. . . . I came back and was packing up my stuff and my dad came

and talked to me and he said, 'You know, I don't support this decision, I support

who you are. But I think it's best for right now that if you're just not here.'

Many of the participants reported improvement in their family relationships over time.

Still, the impact of the family rejection was immeasurable. Between the early formative

messages, and the negative experiences at the hands of church and family, several

participants spoke of a time when they were deeply ashamed of their sexuality.

Internalized Messages. There seemed to be a strong correlation between early

messages about the 'sin' of homosexuality and internalized sense of shame or guilt. One

woman (P4) explained how there was a "disconnect" between her own feelings and what

she'd been taught about gay people. She remembered thinking to herself, *"the way I feel*

about Heather is okay, but gay people are bad". She reasoned:

'I'm not gay just because I love Heather.' I didn't equate the two together because

in my mind the idea of someone who was gay was promiscuous, sex driven, a

nymphomaniac, somebody who preyed on innocent people. So I had a very dark

experience, and yet my feelings for Heather were very warm loving and caring.

 Years later, she began to understand her own feelings, and pray that they would go away.

She recalled how she had come to believe the messages she heard from the church:

But one of the beliefs that I took in was that gay people are so contagious, so

dangerous, and so cunning, that if you have a gay person in your life, if you have

any temptation by them, you need to drive them away. You need to 'shake the

dust off your feet' kind of mentality. You have to let them go and shun them in

order to help them understand how bad their behavior is.

She took this belief to heart and began to distance herself from her gay male friend, fearing that she might be 'led astray' by him, and eventually come out herself.

Another woman (P6) described how she was impacted by the reaction of a woman she referred to as "*the lady who adopted me.*" Her adoptive mother found a love letter than was written by a schoolmate and reacted:

> *. . . she threw the letter and then she punched me. . . . she called me all sorts of names, whatever, whatever. . . But that moment definitely was just. . . I felt really sick. . . I felt really sick about just me being gay. You know? And I guess it just reinforced all those messages about, that I'm not living right and going to Hell.*

She was immediately kicked out of the house after the discovery of the letter. She recalled, "*. . . from 16 to 19 I was homeless. And so that makes you like, 'Well man, maybe there is something wrong with me. Maybe I'm not living how I should be living'.* Now, years later she still struggles with these internalized messages. She explained:

> *But it's been hard not being able to worship in a church. And always having. . . sort of doubting yourself: "Well, am I really doing something wrong? Can I change and I'm just not working hard enough? Or, am I going to go to Hell?" Because that's something that I do believe in, you know. And I think that evangelicals are really good about making it very clear about who's going to Hell. (Laughs) And who's going to Heaven, right?*

Another participant (P2) revealed her own internalized messages by comparisons to violent criminals. She shared the other respondents' sentiments in questioning her salvation. She stated:

. . . I totally believe that God hears the prayer of a gay person versus does he hear

the prayers of a murderer or rapist at his own church? -- of course he does. It

doesn't matter who we are what we've done I think God's grace is still enough for

me. Who knows if I'm right or wrong? But come judgment day I'll find out if I

was right or wrong. And I don't think that anything can turn me away, like it says

in the Bible, from the love of Jesus Christ.

Despite her comparisons and her questioning, her last line reveals her hope in a loving

God who will accept her.

For some of the participants, recognizing their own same-gender attractions led to

them feeling like something was wrong with them for no other reason than being

different. One woman (P7) explained, "*I knew, I think, that there was something about*

me that wasn't right, and for a long time I internalized. And I don't know if it was just

shame, or confu[sion]. . . it might've been all of the above."

Another participant (P6) explains her realization of being different at a very young age.

She remembered:

I knew when I was like seven. You know, like, wanting to hold hands with the

girls on the playground, or whatever. But, you know, I also knew at that age that

there was something wrong about that. And no one ever really talked about gay

people. I didn't know any gay people, but I don't know, you just sort of inherently

know that it's not normal. That you, I guess, seeing everything around you and

there's nothing that describes what you're feeling.

Internalization of negative messages about gay people resulted in fear of Hell, uncertainty

about '*living right*', in feelings of shame. Additionally, a common theme among

participants was a felt need to hide themselves and their lives, opinions, relationships, and core beliefs.

      Silencing. A number of participants shared experiences of feeling silenced, or feeling like they needed to hide themselves or their relationships. Silencing is evident in the experiences of the women who were removed from their church or removed from leadership and told things like, *"You can't be in ministry", "you can't be involved in leadership", "you can't come back here"*, or *"I think it's best . . . if you're just not here"*. One woman (P1) who identifies as bisexual and is married to a man explained her inner conflict about being open about her sexual orientation at her church. She said:

> *It's really easy to "not" be bisexual at church because I'm not visibly queer -- I have a husband. And so you look at me, [and assume] I'm straight, so it's easy for me to pretend. But it's not very fulfilling to pretend.*

She goes on to address the issue of leadership at her current church:

> *I found out that in being queer you can't teach or preach. And that was something I was kind of considering, and it made me mad that as of right now I could, because they would just assume [I was straight]. But, I would be lying. So . . . if I was [in a leadership position] and then I was like, "Guess what? I'm bisexual!" Would they be like, 'You can't do this anymore'? It's frustrating . . . I love that the sign says 'Everybody is welcome'. You're welcome to come, but you're not welcome to actually have a hand in anyone's faith formation.*

One woman (P6) returned to the church of her childhood "*to see what it's like now*". She describes how she was unable to speak her truth in that moment:

> *They were like, 'So why did you leave?' And I really couldn't say . . . it just felt*
>
> *too vulnerable for me… After that people just sort of locked up. They weren't very*
>
> *welcoming. And they were like, 'We're very Bible-based, and we believe certain*
>
> *passages' they said, 'that a lot of other Lutheran churches don't believe.' I wish I*
>
> *could've talked to them and said, 'You know, I really . . . this is a church that I*
>
> *loved and I feel heartbroken that I am not welcome here.'*

She found herself unable to communicate in that moment, and regretting it later.

Another participant (P7) explained how difficult it was for her to tell her very
religious mother that she was lesbian:

> *I really, really struggled for more than three years [with] how to come out to my*
>
> *mother. And there were times where I kind of mustered the strength and I really*
>
> *had kind of a script in my head of what I could say, and I just couldn't do it. I*
>
> *think the fear and anxiety really, really, got to me. And then I thought about I*
>
> *could do it in a letter.… And there was one day I tried to start it 17 different times*
>
> *and I just couldn't.*

She was eventually 'found out' which resulted in several years of little to no contact from
her mother despite her attempts to communicate. Two of the participants indicated how
their culture incorporates a type of 'don't ask don't tell policy. One woman (P2)
explained:

> *Not only being a Christian but being Mexican as well, I think that it's one of those*
>
> *unspoken things. It's, how do I put it… very much not talked about. It's known*
>
> *but never talked about, like the big giant elephant in the room. Everybody knows*
>
> *it's there but we don't speak of it.*

Another woman of Hispanic decent spoke of her experiences in a black Baptist church:

> *And that's the thing, like if they love you, and if you make an impression and we*
>
> *get to know everybody, then they accept you as their family, but you still can't*
>
> *really be out-out. Because that might cause trouble or stir something up.*

In all of these examples, the women felt as if they were hiding themselves, or pieces of themselves from their church communities. There was some relief about not having too many negative messages in these environments, but there remained a sense of isolation or invalidation of romantic relationships.

Two different participants explained the pain involved in hiding not just themselves, but a significant relationship as well. One woman (P2) recalled what it was like to keep a relationship hidden for three years:

> *It was quite difficult to carry on, especially around church friends. . . . To me, it*
>
> *didn't validate my relationship if I couldn't share my joy, I couldn't share my ups*
>
> *and downs with people that I loved and I cared about, that loved me just as much.*
>
> *I felt like . . .it really wasn't real because I had to hide everything and it wasn't*
>
> *until we finally broke up [that I told others]. She didn't think that I wanted to be in*
>
> *a homosexual relationship so she ended things.*

Another woman (P8) explained how isolating it was for her to keep this secret from her family.

> *Yeah, they thought we were friends. And I just was like, 'They don't. . . my family*
>
> *doesn't know me.' And I felt like this huge part of me, I was hiding from them,*
>
> *and I finally just decided, I need to just… I can't handle it anymore all by myself.*

Both of these women came out to their families after the relationships had ended and they were heartbroken and felt alone. At this time they needed to reach out to their families and find comfort.

While the religious culture of these eight women was broad and varied, all of them experienced forms of oppression within their faith environment. Their experiences ranged from unspoken messages of silencing, to outright rejection, to violence. Evidence of internalization of negative messages was common. Despite the prevalence of devastating experiences, all of the participants spoke of their faith as something that is a source of strength to them now. All of them had experiences of transformation. Their transformations are evidence of how they were able rise above systematic oppression and find meaningful faith practice.

Transformation and Empowerment

As indicated earlier, Critical and Feminist theorists have posited that empowerment can come through several means, including finding one's voice, challenging the message of the authority, or rejecting the authority itself. Participant responses closely followed these themes of empowerment. One additional theme was present in every one of the interviews, that personal, meaningful faith experiences counteracted the negative messages of religious authorities.

Telling one's Truth. For many queer women, 'coming out', or speaking one's own truth can be very empowering. Whether speaking the truth leads to acceptance or rejection, the act of speaking out seemed to be an act of bravery, self-advocacy, and putting an end to hiding. Seven of the eight subjects spoke about their experience with coming out. One woman explained (P2) her need to tell her family how her closest friend

had really been her romantic partner for the last three years. When the relationship ended, she said, *"At this time I just had a real gut feeling at that point that my parents really needed to know. . . I remember making a phone call to my mom and telling her about my relationship."* After some initial conflict and hardship, her parents became more supportive. Another woman (P8) had a similar story after a difficult breakup. She recalled:

> *. . .when I broke up with her, I was going through a hard time so one of my friends encouraged me, 'Call your family and tell them; you need to talk to somebody.' And so I called my mom and I told her we broke up. And she's like, 'What do you mean you broke up?' You know? So I kind of had to explain to her.*

When her mom responded with disapproval, she had a few more words for her mother. She told her, *"You know what mom? I don't care if you think it's wrong, and I don't care if you think God thinks that it's a sin. I think it's right, and it feels right to me, so this is me!"* Their arguments continued for some time. She recalled another conversation with her mom:

> *Everything is kind a like a grain of salt when we talk because we're Italians and we argue all the time. We were talking, but it's not anything really serious. I was like, 'You know what mom? Come on get a grip. If you can't support me in this I'm not gonna talk to you.' And she's like, 'oh, you just . . . it's hard for me. I grew up. . .' blah blah blah. And I'm like, 'I don't care. This is me, and you know this is me, so what am I going to do about it? I'm not gonna change because I refuse to be somebody that I'm not!'*

The daughter's own self-advocacy has led to great improvement in her relationship with her mom. Her mom has become far more accepting over the years. She explained:

> *My family loves [my wife] . . . we've been together for six years, we've been married for two, and my mom loves her. She calls her her daughter. My mom says 'I have five daughters', you know, counts [my wife] as one of them.*

She seemed very pleased with this inclusion of her wife into her family.

Another participant (P7) explained how her reasons for coming out to others have changed over the years:

> *. . . it's been a process. I think that initially, when I started to come out to people . . . it was a way to really kind of live out that authenticity. Because, with so many of my other relationships, I felt like I couldn't be fully myself and I couldn't share these aspects about my life. And I think that at first it was more . . . I was probably seeking affirmation. I was probably just looking to receive some sort of acceptance that I wasn't a sinner . . . and I think that it's really evolved to today that its more to kind of advocate; if I come out sometimes it's just to dispel any myths.*

Both of her reasons for coming out speak to empowerment, either in wanting to live authentically, or in wanting to take part in advocating for change and challenging the 'myths' that other people had about lesbians and other LGBTQ people. She gave one example of dispelling myths as she recalled going out with old college friends she hadn't seen in a while:

There were some guys who were talking about lesbians and using really bad

phrases and just making jokes of it, and it got to the point where I just couldn't

take it anymore. And I said, 'well, actually, I am a lesbian.'

Her disclosure opened up a dialog about how not every lesbian looks like they might

expect since it never occurred to them that she could be lesbian.

One participant (P1) who identified as bisexual recalled a time when it was easier

for her to be out. She said, "*I was very out in college and it made me happy. I led*

Alliance. I was pretty active in the community, but then I left my liberal bubble where it

was okay." As a wife and mother in a Christian Church today, she's finding it much

harder to be out. Interestingly, she recalled that it made her happy to be more 'out' and

described her more recent need to hide her orientation to be '*not very fulfilling*'.

Fining one's voice or speaking one's truth was not only apparent in participants'

coming out, but in seeking after membership, leadership, marriage, and acceptance within

their communities or families. One woman (P3) reported a significant turnaround in her

relationship with her mother after years of no contact:

I had ended up writing them a letter and . . . and really just standing my ground,

and saying, 'This is where we're at. We don't have a relationship. Do you want a

relationship?' And that was also where our turning point hit, because we did get

a relationship.

She was able to 'stand her ground', and her mother began to let go of some of her beliefs

that her daughter was sinning and needed to be excluded from the family. Four of the

eight participants reported similar changes in their own families towards a greater

acceptance of them as lesbian or bisexual. These changes seemed to come about over time and with many difficult conversations.

Challenging Church's Teaching. Another way that participants found empowerment was by letting go of their church's teachings and finding out for themselves what they believed to be true. Three of the participants reported going back to the Bible directly so see what it had to say. One woman (P3) who grew up hearing from her mother that lesbians go to Hell, recalled, *"The first thing I had to do was I had to get a Bible for myself. I couldn't just keep hearing what other people had said."* She went on to describe:

> *I really started to study the Bible to understand it, really started to apply things that I was reading to my life and taking on deeper spiritual practices . . . So that's really helped my faith adapt with coming out because what I was hearing from everybody else was just what I was hearing from everybody else -- not what I was hearing from God.*

Similarly, the participant who was nearly kicked out of her Bible college for being suspected of being lesbian shared how going to a more liberal seminary allowed her to explore the Bible in depth. She recalled her excitement about going to seminary:

> *And I thought, "Oh, this is where I can really get down and wrestle in the mud on this. I can really get into this." And my first class was the first time that [they] taught Homosexuality and the Church 101 or Gay Theology or something. . . . So I jumped into the deep end -- big-time! So I got liberation theology; I had all this and I really did bounce off the walls.*

As she researched scripture and various translations for months, she came to the conclusion that, "*there's no grounds, there's no clear grounds to say that homosexuality is a sin of God and a sin worthy of ostracism from the faith.*" Researching the Bible allowed her to put old beliefs to rest.

Three of the participants who grew up without overt anti-gay messages in their homes or churches reported that they never felt that their same gender relationships were wrong in any way. They were still faced with the task of defending themselves to others. Some spoke of an internal sense of right and wrong. One participant (P8) was asked to sit down with her wife and her wife's family as they told her how the Bible says they are wrong in their relationship. She responded:

> *You know what? You live your life on the Bible, and that's fine if that makes you happy and if you are enjoying your life, you can live your life on the Bible. But I don't live my life on the Bible; I live my life on my own values. The Bible is just a guide to me to do the right things and the wrong things.*

She went on to explain:

> *I have certain beliefs and I have certain morals that I follow in my life, and I am not breaking any of those. . . I've never felt like I was doing something wrong. I've never had remorse. I've never felt like I have to apologize. . .*

While they've seen little improvement with some members of her wife's family, they were able to bring about change with her wife's parents. Now she says, "*They love me like their own child, but that took three years.*"

Another woman (P2) spoke about how knowing and loving someone who is LGBTQ can challenge the messages Christians might have been taught. She explained her family dynamics:

We grew up believing that homosexuality was just immoral and just a sin. And I think until someone you know, someone you love very, very much is put in that position [of coming out as gay or lesbian], I don't think their opinions would've changed, but since it was their daughter, I think they started to open up their eyes a little bit more and see me for who I really am, and that was just a child of God.

She spoke of the impact of this family acceptance, saying, *". . .to me, as long as my mom and dad and my family were okay with who I was, I always felt like I really didn't care too much about what everybody else thought of me."*

Rejecting Church or God. A number of participants found a sense of empowerment by rejecting the church or rejecting the idea of the Christian god. Seven of the eight participants reported a time when they stopped attending any faith community altogether and two reported that their experiences led them to question the existence of God. Although these experiences included tremendous loss, they also provided opportunity for empowerment by rejecting the religious authority. One woman (P4) recalled the instance of coming out to her pastor. He told her that she could no longer be in ministry, work with kids, or have a position of leadership, but that she could attend the church. She responded, " *Then this is the last day I'm in this church,"* and promptly left her church of many years. One woman (P6) was a teenager when she heard that gay people at her Lutheran church were only welcome to be fixed. She decided, *"Yeah, I can't ever go to this church again."* Another woman (P5) became aware of a broader

sense of injustice within the Catholic Church. She said, "*. . . it was really difficult then to realize that the church wasn't standing up for all people. So, then basically we didn't go to church.*" One of these women (P6) attempted to find other churches, and explained:

> *And so when I would go to a church and I found out that they didn't accept [homosexuality], it was nothing for me to just walk out and say, ". . . I'm not going to church anymore . . ." which is what I did for a while.*

 Some other women tried to find more affirming churches. One participant (P8) explained her experience of looking for a church:

> *And [nearly] every single church I've attended . . . has said, 'We think it's a sin, but you know, God forgives everybody. It's a sin and it's just the same as stealing to us, the same grade of a sin so we forgive you.' And it's kind of like, 'Then I don't want to attend this church if you think me being who I am is a sin. You're not gonna be a part of my life. . .'*

She developed a very clear set of criteria for what kind of church she would be a part of, and would not settle for a church that called her sinful.

Some of the research suggested that lesbians leave the church more often than gay men because of the double messages of sexist and homophobic doctrine or practice. One woman had not yet come out as bisexual when she decided to leave the church. After being sexually assaulted by another member of her confirmation class she was told that they could not make special accommodations, and that if she couldn't be in the same room with him, then she didn't need to be confirmed. She said:

And so I became very staunchly anti-church, very angry at God. And it just, kind

of, was that way for a long time. . . . I questioned if God existed and if God existed

why He was such a prick.

She returned to a church after many years of staying away.

While most participants left the church for a time, and some found leaving to be

an empowering experience, returning to church after a time was also meaningful for

several participants. Four of the eight participants have returned to church and are

currently involved. The other four have found meaningful spiritual practice outside of

church. One woman (P8) explained her decision to leave:

I kinda worship on my own in my head. . . . I don't go and practice it with other

people just because really, honestly, it's just all the hassle that I've gone through

and all . . . the berating that I've had to deal with with [my wife's] family, it's just

it's kind of exhausted me and I don't even want to be around it, because, to me, it

doesn't benefit me at all.

While involvement with Christians left her feeling berated, she found her own

meaningful spirituality apart from organized religion. Like all of the participants, she has

come to a place of a current spirituality that benefits her and she finds meaningful.

Personal Meaningful Faith Experiences. Previous research has shown the

benefits of religious involvement and spirituality, as indicated in the literature presented

above. Themes emerged among these interviews that suggest that one's own spiritual

development could be a source of resilience, empowerment, and meaning. Given the

messages that many of the participants grew up with, many of them shared the sentiment

of one participant's question, *"How is it possible to integrate these two worlds?"*

Meaningful spirituality emerged through changes in one's view of God, finding community, seeing the examples of others, having a specific spiritual experience, or developing personal faith practice. These personal experiences seemed to give participants confidence in their stance against oppressive messages.

Five of the eight participants expressed finding benefit from a spiritual community that is affirming, or moving towards affirming. One participant (P3) explains how her support group has become a spiritual community for her:

> *My spirituality practices are pretty much my overeaters anonymous meetings, is where I get most of my fellowship. . . And one thing I really liked about this program is that you can be a Buddhist, a Taoist, a Jew, and we can all discuss our higher power in the sense that can affect us. It doesn't matter what we believe in, but we can discuss our faith with each other. And that has just fostered my growth here. One day at a time, one meal at a time, I'm renewing my faith pretty much every second of every day, it's this continuation. I love it, I'm so happy with my life right now!*

Another woman explained how profoundly meaningful it was for her to see her partner's transgender transition printed in the bulletin of his church, while, in contrast, her Catholic community was only willing to perform a sort of "underground" or "hidden away" wedding for them. She stated:

> *I could cry right now to just thinking about it, was seeing in the bulletin, in the church, in the church registry where it says births and deaths, [the church] printed it, it said, 'transition: [female name] becomes [male name]'. [She cries]. So it was like "whoa!"   There's nothing, were not hiding anything here, you*

know what I mean? What is there to hide? Here it is: '[female name] is [male

name]'. We want everybody to know! It's a good thing. And it was like, 'Whoa!'

Similarly, some participants found it helpful to get to know other queer woman who had

developed strong spiritual lives. It was helpful to hear from others, "*You can have faith*

and be queer."

In addition to finding spiritual communities, several participants reported certain

spiritual experiences that helped to shape their own faith. One woman (P3) shared her

experience in the mountains of Montana when she was wrestling with her sexuality and

the messages she had been taught. She said:

> *I was in Montana, and you know, a place very few people have ever seen, and I*
>
> *sat down and I was like, 'Alright God, what's going on?' And that was kind of*
>
> *when I had this revelation that I felt, really, God's presence with me, and I felt*
>
> *that, 'All right, God has made all these beautiful things - I'm not a mistake.' And*
>
> *that was pretty much it. It was laid to rest then.*

She continued to remember that moment as a source of strength. When asked about why

she continued to pursue spirituality she stated, "*Because I held onto that day up in*

Montana where I was just like, 'this is not . . . I am not a mistake.'"

Seven of the eight participants reported their view of what God is like changed in

a way that was meaningful to them. One woman (P2) reported:

> *I think my opinion of God, who he really is, has more or less changed in the sense*
>
> *of, before I felt very shamed, like very shameful of who I was, and who I loved.*
>
> *And, I think I've come to the opinion of no matter what, I know God still loves me,*
>
> *even if everybody else has a problem with who I am and what I'm doing. I know*

> *that God just kinda wrapped His arms around me and comforted me and showed*
>
> *me mercy and grace.*

Another woman (P8) similarly reported a change in her view of God, seeing God as one who loves and cares for her. She said:

> *I just think He is a helping hand and a guidance through life. And if there's*
>
> *something wrong and you see him, it's just kind of a reminder, 'Hey, if you don't*
>
> *think anybody in this world cares about you, well at least I do. If you don't think*
>
> *anybody in this world loves you, well at least I do.'*

She goes on to explain her move away from a view of God as someone who is out to point out her mistakes or shortcomings. She said:

> *I just think that I know the difference between right and wrong, and God is there*
>
> *to help me get through life and do the things right, and make my life meaningful,*
>
> *and be happy, and love, and give. And God is more so like [a] helping hand to me*
>
> *now, rather than a something like an authoritative figure.*

These women all moved away from the idea of a God who judges towards a God who loves and accepts. Only one participant (P5) felt that her view of God remained the same. When asked how her view of God has changed over the years, she responded:

> *I believe in a benevolent loving God. It seems like I should say, oh yes, I've had*
>
> *some profound thing, but when it comes down to it, I think the God of my*
>
> *childhood is the God I still believe in.*

She reported being a part of a meaningful, active, social justice oriented church as a child, and her belief in that God has not changed.

Several participants reported growth in their spiritual life or interactions with God. One woman explained how a more interactive relationship with God was developed over time.

> *In the beginning, it was just, like, 'you're supposed to do what God wants' and now I really am, like, more, 'Are you sure this is what you want me to do?' And like having a dialogue with God --that's something I've never really had in my past, like, I feel like the relationship is reciprocal.*

Another woman (P4) explained the growth she experienced in her spiritual life since coming out:

> *I think I have a much richer spirituality, that it's more personal. I never used to really have a strong devotional life, or personal prayer life. Even in all the years it was: when I'm in trouble I'm going to pray. When I'm not in trouble, "forget you God, I'm fine, I'm good." And it was very much this outward expression of faith. Now it's much more integrated, where I cherish the three hours in the morning that I have to be alone and I do whatever I want. I pray, I read this scripture, I meditate, I do body stretches, I read my e-mail, I do whatever I want, but it's my time - my time with God.*

One participant (P8) explained how the change in her view of God has affected her life, and why she holds onto her spiritual beliefs. She said, *"I like to have that kind of joy and faith and hope in my life . . . it makes me feel good about myself and makes me a better person."*

As indicated above, all of the participants had some very negative experiences with faith communities and/or Christian individuals. The group was evenly split about

whether or not they were currently involved in a faith community, and if they've had

some positive redeeming experiences of faith communities. Whether or not the

participants had returned to spiritual community, they all described personal, deeply

meaningful, transformational spiritual experiences or beliefs that seemed to give their life

depth and meaning. They had vastly different experiences within non-affirming Christian

churches. Empowerment and growth came through several avenues; Christian

community was not a prerequisite.

Strengths and Limitations

By utilizing a snowball method of gathering a research sample, the selected

sample may not accurately reflect the larger population of queer women of faith.

Additionally, snowball sampling may miss people who are not socially well-connected

(Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). This study could miss the experiences of women

who feel they don't belong in either Christian or queer communities, a common theme in

the previous literature.

A second limitation lies in the small sample size of eight women. In no way does

this seek to describe the experiences of all lesbian Christian women. It does seek to find

common themes among women who have developed an affirming and life-giving

spirituality despite significant negative experiences. Additionally it does not seek to

discredit the experiences of women who have benefited from rejecting religious

affiliations. More research needs to be conducted to answer questions of the mental and

emotional health of queer Christian women.

Despite the researchers desire to include a diverse range of experiences and faith

practices, it seemed that drawing from too broad of a population could limit the focus and

lead to less clear results. Sampling participants from the Midwest gathered women who

have likely lived within a very Christian culture. Though difficult to prove, it has been

said that Minnesota is an easier place to be gay and Christian than many other regions in

America. Presumably this is due to the strong religious tradition of the Midwest, the

large queer community, and a culture of 'Minnesota nice' that seeks to avoid conflict.

Information gathered from this sample may have limited use to those who live in more

liberal or more conservative regions.

One limitation in the execution of the interviews resulted from one of the

interviews being conducted over the phone. This interview was significantly shorter than

the others and likely missed some important information. In a second interview, the

daughter of the participant wanted to sit in on the interview. The daughter is another

participant who was referred to me by the mother. She was adopted at age 19 after

several years of homelessness. Her presence in the interview may have impacted the

mother's responses, although both seemed comfortable.

One of the major strengths of this study is the opportunity to learn from the

experience of others. Story is a powerful tool to help social workers grow in

understanding, compassion, and competence. Participants seemed eager to share these

stories resulting in substantive interviews. Personal interviews allow for optimal

understanding of participants' experiences and their faith journey. The semi-structured

interview format allows for clarification and additional probing (Monette, et al, 2011).

Drawing theories from coded interviews will allow for unexpected conclusions or

surprising findings to emerge from the data. While ample research explores the damage

done by religious institutions, this study seeks to find themes among women who have found meaningful faith experiences despite broken systems.

Discussion

The findings of this study strongly support previous research that LGBTQ people in Christian Churches face discrimination, harassment, judgment and cruelty. Despite the notion of 'Minnesota Nice', participants were treated, at times, with cruelty. Participants faced homelessness, ostracism from families, removal from leadership, removal from Christian communities, and countless lectures that they were sinning or destined for Hell. These were clear and significant barriers to involvement in faith communities.

The findings also support the research that messages of condemnation and judgment were damaging to lesbian and bisexual women. Participants who experienced 'louder' and 'harsher' messages of condemnation showed evidence of internalized homophobia and spoke of intense shame, fear of coming out, and fear of going to Hell. Those who spent time trying to keep a romantic relationship hidden from friends and family experienced isolation and a discrediting of the relationship that could not be recognized by others.

The spiritual development of the participants was frequently quite profound. They progressed from shame and isolation to an internal assurance that they are ok and that God is ok with them. They had meaningful experiences of God as comforting, accepting, loving, welcoming, and intimate.

Four Choices

The literature review outlined four choices LGBTQ individuals have when they are involved in non-affirming religious environments (Pitt, 2010; Morrow, 2003).

Spiritual transformation seemed to occur as these women passed through the various

choices available to them. These categories were not concrete life decisions, but

temporary choices based on different situations. Some participants experienced a time of

trying to reject their sexuality through reparative therapy or denial. These experiences

were associated with pain and futility. Some attempted to compartmentalize by keeping a

relationship secret from others in their church or family. There was also pain associated

with this choice, as the relationship was devalued and the subjects felt very isolated in not

feeling known. Rejecting God or the church was something most participants

experienced for a time. It seemed to be an importance piece of their spiritual journey.

Rejected the church's teachings was necessary for these women to develop an affirming

spirituality. For some, they needed to leave to avoid ongoing abuse and rejections.

Leaving community seemed to be a mix of both empowerment and loss. Empowerment

in how it allowed these women to speak the truth about themselves and not allow others

to define how they should live. It involved significant loss because the faith communities

were deeply meaningful to many of these women, and not easily abandoned. Finally,

integration of sexual and spiritual selves was a process that some participants were still

wrestling with. Others felt like their faith was stronger and more meaningful than ever

before.   Others never felt like their spiritual and sexual identities were in conflict, and

had no problem with the concept of lesbian Christian. They felt like these identities were

not at all mutually exclusive and wondered why others had such a problem with them.

        The experiences of this study suggest that there is no clear cut answer to 'spiritual

health' for queer women. There was not prescription for positive integration and

development of an affirming spirituality. Meaningful spiritual life existed for those who

remained in faith communities and for those who left. Still, loss of community was

painful. Many members who had left the church were looking for a place to worship and

had not yet found one that fit.

Spirituality and Resilience

Farley's (2007) study linked resiliency and spirituality. Resiliency was understood

as the ability to cope with distressing situations, or the ability to recover. She links traits

found in resilience to traits found in religious and spiritual practice. Participants' stories

of transformation suggest that a personal spirituality can be a source of resilience,

strength, and empowerment. Participants reported that their faith made them feel happy;

it called them to love others, forgive, and become better people. Many spoke of God as

the one who comforts them, gives them strength, and loves them no matter what. Their

personal spirituality can be seen as a protective force against the negative messages

they've heard from religious people and institutions. A number of participants reported

that their experience of God in some way reminds them that they are loved and accepted

no matter what anyone else may say. Personal spiritual experiences were prevalent,

meaningful, and seemingly life changing.

Farley suggests that practitioners may find spirituality to be a helpful resource to

clients who have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect. Her study did not include trauma

inflicted by religious institutions and religious teachings. Using spirituality as a helping

tool for those who've endured spiritual abuses may be more complicated and require

more sensitivity. Still, participants reported that their personal spirituality was beneficial

when confronted with anti-gay messages from Christians.

Story as Healing Tool

One of the most striking aspects of the interviews was how eager each participant was to share her story. Several participants explained that they are very private about their faith, or private about their sexual orientation, but when given the opportunity to talk about their faith experiences, they shared openly, honestly, and at great length about their lives and their spiritual development. They seemed to want to tell their stories in a way that could impact others. Though nine women were asked to participant, only one declined because she didn't feel that she had a current meaningful spiritual practice. Others were very willing to participate and refer friends, expressing that the study was important to them. They requested follow up information and showed an interest in the outcome. This alone implies that this population has not had ample opportunities to tell their stories in supportive environments, and that they found meaning in doing so.

Implications for Social Workers

As social workers strive to be culturally competent, we must be constantly learning about and from the various at risk populations we serve. In addition, as we strive to address the bio, psycho, social, and spiritual aspects of our clients' lives, we need to be well equipped to address each of these areas. Cultural competence should include a spiritual sensitivity and a willingness to assess and discuss clients' spirituality. Mental health professionals have historically been uncomfortable addressing the spiritual side of the lives of their clients. When LGBTQ people have been silenced in their churches or other religious environments, it is imperative that they are not silenced by helping professionals as well. When religious establishments have not been a safe place, social workers can provide that safe place for individuals to explore how to carve out a

spirituality that reduces feelings of shame, guilt, and hopelessness, and imparts a sense of being loved and accepted.

Becoming a spiritually sensitive practitioner involves frequent self-reflection and awareness of counter-transference as it arises. There was no clear-cut answer for the participants to find a healthy spiritual life. Religious practitioners need to be aware of their own biases and be open to the spiritual experiences of their clients. Practitioners who believe that it is a sin to become involved in same-gender relationships may need to refer their clients to someone else if they are unable to create a safe environment for their client to explore their own beliefs. Practitioners who are involved in affirming communities must not assume that their LGBTQ clients should be involved in affirming communities as well, since involvement in faith community was not a prerequisite for meaningful and protective spirituality. Some found meaning in attending a community that was 'moving towards' and affirming position, because they got to take part in change towards inclusion. Non-religious social workers may need to be aware of any bias they may have against faith communities. They need to be able to acknowledge the great loss involved in losing one's faith community. All practitioners need not assume that any LGBTQ person of faith is struggling to resolve conflict in their spiritual and sexual identities – for many, no such conflict exists.

Sherry and colleagues asserted, "Since research suggests that the ability to integrate spirituality and sexuality improves one's mental health (Wagner, et at, 1994), the ability of counselors to help clients negotiate such conflicts becomes an essential skill set." They indicate that the ultimate goal is to create a safe place for the client to explore

for themselves. Practitioners who are open to the various experiences of their clients and do the work of self-reflection will be best suited for this job.

Conclusion

American culture seems to be moving in the direction acceptance and welcome of LGBTQ people. Still, change is slow and religious communities are often slower than society at large. Queer Christians may be uniquely suited to bring about change and reform within their own communities. Before they can take on any efforts to push for equality within their religious or political systems, they must be firmly rooted in their own beliefs. They must be assured of their value and strength and purpose. They must first find safety and healing. Perhaps they need to rewrite their own stories into stories of redemption and transformation as the participants in this study have done.

Social workers and mental health practitioners can provide the safe space for LGBTQ individuals to develop a spirituality that is a source of strength and resilience. By encouraging clients to find out for themselves what it means to be human, what God is like, what brings them meaning and purpose, and how to live out values that are bigger than them, practitioners can assist clients in building their resiliency through meaningful spirituality.

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