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April 19, 2011

Homosexual-Christian Identity: An Analysis Of Institutional Policies, Church Attitudes,
Personal Narratives, with Emphasis On Key Influences That Shape a Reconciled Homosexual-
Christian Identity

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Abstract

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By Charles Edward Barber II

In both our society and in the broader Christian Church there has historically been a great deal of stigma that shrouds homosexuality, especially as an innate sexual orientation. This study explores the history of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, particularly in an American context. It seeks to provide insight into factors that can cause identity conflicts for gay and lesbian Christians, be they familial, societal, or theological. Through the analysis of thirteen first hand interviews, it provides a glimpse into the ways in which these gay and lesbian Christians have dealt with conflicts regarding their sexuality and their faith, in order to create what this study deems a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity. Overall, this study seeks to add to the growing body of works that explore homosexual-religious identity.

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Preface

In many ways this study is a departure from standard anthropological practice. It does not directly address the diversity of voices and perspectives present among homosexual Christian church-goers, and it does not address the multitude of meanings sexual and religious identities have for Christian individuals, or the variety of ways in which these identities are lived out. Furthermore it does not examine the subtle ideological distinctions among Christian denominational theologies, which define a complex gradient of outlooks on homosexuality. Rather this work focuses on the polar opposite ends of the “anti-gay”/“pro-gay spectrum”, which define the current debates pertaining to homosexuality within Christian teachings as a two-sided argument. This may seem an over simplification of these viewpoints. Though it is important to stress that pragmatically the diversity of theological positions regarding homosexuality essentially define a simple ideological dichotomy. The vast majority of Christian Church denominations deem homosexuality to be incompatible with Christian teachings. By contrast, only a small minority subscribe to “pro-gay” theological stances, which do not discriminate against those who are same-sex attracted. This study is interested in contrasting pro-gay and anti-gay theologies, and exploring their differential impact on persons who were interviewed.

Many, as opposed to Christian denominations themselves, many individuals hold Christian theological viewpoints that take a “middle-ground” about issues pertaining to homosexuality. This study does not emphasize such middle-ground viewpoints, as they might lead to false assumptions that there does not exist a strong a binary in the broader Christian community pertaining to the compatibility of homosexuality with Christian teachings. Thus, the anthropological world-view that so readily embraces and explores diversity would be at odds

with the fundamentalist world-view that is held by the majority of Christian Church denominations, especially when concerning sexual diversity.

Both homosexual and Christian identities are simplified in this study in order to provide clear distinctions about the viewpoints given Christian Church denominations and certain individuals hold, regarding homosexuality as an innate sexual orientation, as well as its alignment with Christian teachings. The people whose voices appear in this study identified themselves as homosexual-Christians, and like many other gay and lesbian persons of the Christian faith acknowledged feeling tension between their sexual orientation, their homosexual-identity, and their religious beliefs, their Christian identity. For the purposes of this study the term “homosexual identity” is used to refer to persons who know themselves to be same-sex attracted, irrespective of whether or not they act sexually upon this attraction. “Homosexual lifestyle” is used to refer to persons who practice same-sex sexual activity and identify as homosexual, and is not to be associated with the multitude of ways that gay or lesbian persons live their lives, sexually or otherwise. Similarly Christian identity is used specifically to refer to people who identify themselves with the Christian faith, and does not refer to the many ways in which people practice their faith, or the variety of viewpoints they hold about their faith. The term “Christian-lifestyle” is used to refer to a way of life that is condoned by a particular Christian community. For example, practicing homosexuals, be they monogamous or not, would be deemed not to be leading a proper Christian lifestyle according to Christian communities that subscribe to anti-gay theologies. The opposite would be true for Christian communities that subscribe to pro-gay theologies, given that the persons in question live their lives according to what that tradition deems a proper “Christian lifestyle”. The term “homosexual-Christian

identity” is used to refer to a reconciled harmonious identity, in which gay or lesbian individuals feel little or no conflict between their sexual or religious identities.

It is important to set forth these distinctions in order that one does not assume this study is failing to recognize the many ways in which people, heterosexual or homosexual, Christian or non-Christian, live out and/or hold different meanings about given identities in their lives. The use of these simplified terms allows the ideological dichotomy that exists in the broader Christian community, concerning the compatibility or incompatibility of homosexuality with Christian theology, to be discussed concisely. This thesis highlights certain factors that can cause feelings of conflict between a gay or lesbian person’s sexual identity and their Christian identity, and the strategies that many of these people take in order to reconcile the two identities.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Goals, Methods, and Framing

To gain a better understanding of the reconciled “homosexual-Christian identity”, one must look at either side of pro-gay or anti-gay Christian theological arguments to see how historical forces and societal norms affect reconciliation processes of homosexual and Christian identities. Rodriguez and Ouellette define gay men and lesbians who have a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity to hold positive homosexual and religious identities that are integrated, as well as having no “self-imposed walls between their homosexuality and their religious beliefs, and perceiving societally-imposed barriers as surmountable” (2000:335). This is the definition this study will use to define reconciled homosexual-Christian identity. Issues concerning the compatibility of homosexuality, as an innate sexual orientation, with Christian theology are receiving considerable public attention today. Those on either side of the pro-gay/anti-gay binary use quotations from the Bible and/or cite research from a variety of fields to support their stances. Current debates concerning the alignment of same-sex desire with Christian theology in our society are the product of historical and social constructs that have been evolving for millennia, since the invention of the term sodomy in the 11th century.

This work acknowledges the broad spectrum of Christian doctrines, beliefs, and praxes, some which accept or denounce homosexuality more or less fervently than others. However, For the purposes of this research the phrase “pro-gay theology” refers to Christian Church denominations with doctrines, policies, and or statements that specifically support the inclusion

of homosexual persons within their given denomination, without seeking to change these persons' gay or lesbian sexual identities. Such churches do not speak ill of homosexuals and/or same-sex sexual practices, nor do they label same-sex attracted persons as condemned to hell, sinners of the worst sort, perverts, demons, et cetera. "Anti-gay theology" refers to official denominational doctrines that deem homosexuality as a sinful manifestation of sexual expression, and feel the homosexual lifestyle to be inherently incongruent with Christian teachings. These churches seldom if ever allow openly gay or lesbian men and women to hold leadership positions within the church, and often exclude membership to openly homosexual persons. The terms "anti-gay" or "pro-gay" encompass both gay men and lesbians, while the term "gay" is used in this study specifically when discussing homosexual men.

Theological debates raise complex questions about a variety of issues, such as those surrounding notions of morality and the afterlife. Such questions can present persons who identify as both homosexual and Christian with conflicts between their sexual and religious identities. One might presume that those individuals who identify as gay or lesbian and Christian would align themselves with Christian denominations that have pro-gay theologies, but this is not always the case. One merely needs to note the plethora of ex-gay programs, like those of Exodus International and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, which are supported by the Southern Baptist Convention and other Christian Church denominations with anti-gay theologies. Such programs seek to change a homosexual person's sexual orientation and/or homosexual identity to that of a heterosexual person.

Homosexual and Christian identities are inherently complex in and of themselves, but elements of either identity can become increasingly complicated when the two are combined. Such complications arise because of the dichotomy that has been imposed by those who believe

homosexuality and Christianity to be incongruent with one another. The dichotomy between homosexuality and Christianity has been historically present throughout the life of the Christian Church, but has become an increasingly pervasive and dividing factor within the broader Christian Community over the past 150 years, since the invention of the terms heterosexual and homosexual. The invention of these terms allowed forms of sexual desire to be named, and subsequently to be debated within society and the broader Christian community. Exploration of the homosexual-Christian identity in this study is meant to illuminate factors that may promote or inhibit reconciliation of homosexual and Christian identities. Although this study addresses a broad range of areas that can cause conflict between sexual and religious identities, it is not suggesting that every gay and lesbian Christian at some point experiences a conflict between the two, which is a point noted by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000:333-347). This study seeks to illuminate issues that promote feelings of identity incongruity for homosexual-Christian persons, which can, as Wolkomir notes, cause these individuals to feel great anxiety for their souls, and present them with a great struggle (2006:4-5). For many of these individuals it may require that they “undergo the coming apart and recomposing of their most cherished patterns and anchors of trust”, in order to create a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity (Garland 2002:75). Though many persons who identify as homosexual-Christians have a variety of ways in which they manage their religious and sexual identities, which may or may not lead to a harmonious reconciled homosexual-Christian identity (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000: 334).

This study identifies various historical arguments used to support the claimed incompatibility of homosexuality and Christianity, as well as those arguments that support the congruency of the two. Historical background is given to provide insight into the evolution of the heterosexual norm that is present in our society today. Overviews of doctrines, policies, and

statements from various Christian denominations are included within the body of this work to highlight how stances professed by given denominations affect not only gay and lesbian individuals of faith, but also the attitudes and policies of the society in which we live. Excerpts from personal narratives of thirteen individuals, from two Episcopal Churches and one Unity Fellowship church, are a vital part of this study because they provide first-hand insight into the homosexual-Christian identity. The ethnographic portion of this work, which is rooted in the lived experiences of those whose interviews appear in the text, is aimed specifically at determining what factors have played a part in the reconciliation of their gay or lesbian and Christian identities.

By grounding this study in historical, institutional, and personal narrative contexts, it seeks to provide a holistic understanding of factors that shape a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity. It by no means claims to offer exhaustive or definitive answers to all questions concerning the alignment of homosexuality with Christianity, or questions surrounding the reconciliation of homosexual and Christian identities. Also, this study does not claim that the doctrines, policies, and statements of Christian denominations mentioned in this text are necessarily representative of all persons associated with a given denomination, or of individual churches that directly ascribe to a particular doctrine. Questions surrounding bisexual and transgender issues as they pertain to Christianity are not addressed in this work, though they are important areas of study.

Position Statements Of Denominations
Included In This Study

The following are brief overviews of official positions held by various Christian Church denominations regarding homosexuality and Christian teachings. Positions held by given denominations and churches are used in the following chapters to frame arguments either for or against pro-gay theologies, and to provide context for doctrines that have in some way impacted the faith journeys of those whose stories appear in the text.

Those churches with pro-gay theologies included in this text include: the Episcopal Church U.S.A and Unity Fellowship Church. The Episcopal Church U.S.A. is the older of the two, and has had a rich history of directly addressing issues surrounding the topic of sexuality and Christian theology. In 1976 it made an initial statement regarding its stance about homosexuality, and since then it has fostered continuous dialogue about issues of homosexuality and Christianity among its own congregations, as well as between denominations (General Convention 1976:C-109). Since their initial pro-gay stance in 1976 the denomination has updated its own doctrine with statements that specifically call for the inclusion of gay and lesbian as full members of the Church.

Reverend Carle Bean, an openly gay African American minister, founded Unity Fellowship Church, UFC, in early 1980s Los Angeles. Bean felt there was a need to minister to the LGBT community in the area (UFC 2010:History). Since then their congregations have spread to numerous states the United States, and their members number in the thousands. Due to the that fact it was founded specifically to address the spiritual and social needs of homosexual persons it is defined by Rodriguez and Ouellette as gay-positive (2000:336), which is a term that

is used in this text. Unity Fellowship Church has been and currently is involved in social movements and social justice works seeking religious and legal rights of homosexual persons.

Christian Church denominations having anti-gay theologies that are mentioned for the purposes of framing this study include the Catholic Church, churches belonging to the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church. Each of these denominations have doctrines, policies, and statements that deem homosexual persons, especially practicing homosexual persons, to be living in a way that is not condoned by God, regardless of whether or not persons in same-sex relationships are living in monogamous committed relationships. The official doctrines, policies, and statements of the Christian churches vary in terms of how severely they denounce homosexuality. Certain churches included within this category have viewpoints that define the sin of homosexuality in what I will term “levels of sinfulness”, the worst being the practicing homosexual and less sinful the celibate homosexual.

Research Methodology

Research methodology for this study included both academic and first-hand ethnographic research. The academic research portion of this study was aimed at finding specific cross-disciplinary sources that provided insights into the evolution of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and about the construction of the gay and lesbian Christian identities. Ethnographic research consisted primarily of personal interviews conducted with congregants from two Episcopal Churches and one Unity Fellowship Church, all located in Atlanta, which are popularly known to be inclusive of and friendly towards gay and lesbian persons. I also interviewed the rector of one of the Episcopal Churches and both the Pastor and Assistant Pastor of the Unity Fellowship Church, in order to gain a better understanding of their particular congregations’ stances about issues regarding the compatibility of homosexuality and Christian

theology. Also, I attended at least four worship services at each of the churches in order to assess the extent to which a congregation's praxis aligns with or differs from the denomination's official doctrines, policies, or statements of belief.

In order to be put in contact with potential interviewees I spoke with the heads of each church, who were then able to identify members of their congregations they thought would be willing to assist me in the interview process. Upon contacting these persons I was able to set up personal interviews with thirteen of these individuals, which lasted from one to two hours, and focused on a person's faith journey, i.e. their personal history with their faith. Where possible I tried to allow for a diverse sample in terms of gender, age, and race. This subject pool is likely somewhat biased towards congregants who are happy in their current congregations, and who have reconciled their homosexual and religious identities. Thus, the viewpoints of interviewees do not account for the diversity of ways in which gay and lesbian Christians deal with their sexual and religious identities. This study excludes congregants from churches with anti-gay theologies because of greater risks that could have been placed on these persons, and because of various other constraints that were placed upon this study. The voices of those who appear in the text speak generally to the topic of the construction of a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity.

Interviews were conducted in a place of the participant's choosing, and followed a semi-structured format. Formatting interviews in this way allowed for a degree of flexibility, in that it allowed the interviewee and to explore areas of interest that arose throughout the conversation, but nonetheless answered a series of questions regarding his or her faith journey, particularly as it related to the reconciliation of his or her sexual and spiritual identities. The questions asked were designed to elicit an overview of how individuals may or may not have been able to

reconcile all or parts of their gay or lesbian and Christian identities. Specifically, the interview questions were designed to provide an understanding of the role Christianity played in an interviewee's life from childhood to present, what were and/or are perceived obstacles along his or her faith journey, and how he or she feels denominational viewpoints encountered have shaped his or her journey towards forming a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity.

This thesis was influenced by the work of Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Ouellette, *Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church*. Their work explores ways in which gay and lesbian persons deal with their sexual and religious identities, which is foundational for this text because they name four strategies that gay and lesbian religious persons often employ for dealing with identity conflict between these two identities, which include rejecting their religious identities, rejecting their homosexual identities, compartmentalization, and identity integration (Ouellette, 334). Their categories are particularly valuable for this research because they name the strategies many interviewees used to cope with conflicts they perceived between their sexual and religious identities. Their research also provides insights into the cultural and psychological constructs that can cause identity conflicts. Though this study borrowed heavily from the work of Rodriguez and Ouellette, it differs in that it seeks to understand factors, be they familial, societal, and/or religious that shape the homosexual-Christian identity by analyzing them through historical and personal narrative contexts.

Summary of Following Chapters

The following chapters of this text present a variety of information starting with background information on the evolution of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, especially how it applies to the Christian Church, various Christian doctrines, and how historical factors have influenced popular notions regarding the alignment between homosexuality and Christianity. Chapter 2 focuses on previous research that has been conducted in areas that relate to identity formation, and document how conflict can arise between aspects of one or more of a person's identities, particularly as they relate to gay or lesbian and Christian identities. Chapter 3 discusses the history of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, and its evolution from the beginnings of the early Christian Church to current debates in the Christian community and in society today. Excerpts from personal narratives and insights from participant observation are provided in chapter 4 to contextualize the factors that interviewees felt impacted their journeys towards identity reconciliation. The end result of the study seeks a better understanding of the construction of a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity, and how affiliations with certain Christian denominations, be they pro-gay or anti-gay in terms of theology, affect a gay or lesbian persons' abilities to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. Although this study acknowledges the diversity of thoughts and opinions concerning issues of congruity between homosexuality and Christianity, it is framed to stress the importance of reconciliation of the homosexual and Christian identities for those whose voices appear in this text, as well as to provide insight into historical factors that have led to a group of people, i.e. gay and lesbian Christians, being marginalized in both society and within the broader Christian community.

Questions This Study Seeks to Answer

-What historical factors related to Christian theology and the evolution of certain terms defining sexuality have led to the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy present in the broader Christian community and in our society today?

-Why have certain Christian Church denominations come to adopt pro-gay or anti-gay theologies?

-In a personal narrative context, what are certain factors individuals feel have been obstacles that have had to be overcome along their path to identity reconciliation?

-In a personal narrative context, what are key factors an individual felt were instrumental in aiding their reconciliation process?

-In a personal narrative context, how has an individual's life experiences with pro-gay or anti-gay theologies affected his or her journey to being able to reconcile his or her homosexual and Christian identities?

Chapter 2

Review of Previous Research and Other Sources

Sources Related to the Heterosexual/Homosexual Dichotomy

In discussing the current state of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, emphasis needs to be placed on the evolution of this binary, specifically historical factors that have shaped it. In her work, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (1981), Margaret Miles discusses why the human body, especially notions of bodily purity, have become so profound in Christian theology. She explains the impact the works of many early theologians have had historically on Christian theology. Her analysis of Saint Augustine's viewpoints describing the body as a catalyst for sin, and his notions of human sexuality serves to provide insight into the foundation what the early Christian Church deemed appropriate human sexual behavior.

The works of Saint Augustine were some of the most influential in the creation of the Roman Catholic Church's viewpoints concerning human sexual morality, what constituted appropriate sexual expression, and notions of purity of the body. Select excerpts from his works, *On Christian Doctrine* and *The City of God*, written in the 300s and 400s C.E., are used by this study to document the beginnings of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. Viewpoints from his text were adopted into doctrine by the early Christian Church, and laid the foundation for notions of sin surrounding certain sexual behaviors that were anything other than male-to-female genital sexual behaviors.

It was from the time of Augustine's writings and the subsequent adoption of what he defined to be appropriate sexual behavior by the early Christian Church that other forms of sexual expression were labeled sinful, and carried with them a great deal of stigma. Mark

Jordan's text, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997), contributes to the discussion of the categorization process that allowed certain sexual acts to be named for the purposes classifying sexual sins and sinners. His text further examines how the works of early theologians, such as Augustine, determined what constituted appropriate sexual expression according to Christian theology, and how these notions still shape current viewpoints about human sexuality in the broader Christian Church.

Jonathan Ned Katz furthers the discussion of the evolution of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, particularly in the American context, in his book, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (2007). His discussion of early-early American sexual values is important for understanding how the current heterosexual norm that pervades our society is a by-product of these values, which were inherently linked to Christian theology. This link stems from the fact that colonists brought with them sexual values that were defined by the Christian Church, which at that time included both Protestant and Catholic viewpoints, both of which considered the only appropriate form of sexual manifestation to be male-to-female genital acts between married couples. This text discusses the invention of the terms heterosexual and homosexual in the mid-to-late 1800s. It was at this point in time, he notes, homosexuality began to be medicalized. He uses the key works of early psychotherapists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud, who analyzed sexuality in a medical context, to frame his discussion about why the heterosexual norm began to be strongly reinforced in our society because of the predominant views that homosexuality was disordered sexuality. Katz also utilizes the works of the philosopher Michel Foucault, to point to the fact that the categories of heterosexual and homosexual essentially eliminated the acceptability of human sexual diversity.

In their compiled work, *Sexuality in America*, 1998, Robert Francoer, Patricia Koch, and David Weiss, expound on the societal and religious stigma that shrouds homosexuality. Their discussion involves documenting milestones in American history, the gay rights movement, and anti-homosexual movements. These various historical moments and social movements have influenced the ways many Americans view human sexuality, as well as having impacts on national politics, both in terms of prohibiting and extending various rights to gay and lesbian persons.

Gayle Rubin documents many of the same historical factors, as Francoer, Koch, and Weiss, that served to forge the heterosexual/homosexual binary in the United State in her work, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* (1984). She notes that in the 1950s American society “waged war” on homosexuals, who became victims of intense discrimination and often violence, and since that time the heterosexual norm has been heavily reinforced in American politics, society, and religion. (Rubin 1984, 268-270). Her work describes how socially constructed notions of sexuality have caused the marginalization of persons who go against this norm, and because she counters societal ideals that human sexuality is supposed to conform to one specific pattern.

The controversies surrounding legal and religious rights that have been and are still being denied to homosexual persons are documented in *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*, a work authored by Sonia Correa, Rosalind Petchesky, and Richard Parker. Both religious and political debates concerning sexuality are highlighted, which emphasize how from the beginnings of the Christian Church sexuality has been controlled by religion. The Catholic Church as an institution has changed the entire course of Western civilization and shaped many viewpoints, such as those surrounding notions of what constitute appropriate sexual expression that are still present in our

society today. Thus by utilizing their examination of policies of the Catholic Church this study is able to create a better understanding of how Christianity has been used as a tool to shape sexual mores throughout Western history, and subsequently why many who identify as same-sex attracted and Christian may have difficulty in reconciling their sexual and religious identities.

Today there exists a better understanding and broader acceptance of homosexuality, but there also exists strong anti-gay sentiments, which are present both in society and Christianity. In his book, *Queer Question, Clear Answers: The Contemporary Debates On Sexual Orientation* (2010), Thomas Serwatka explores debates and debunks many myths surrounding homosexuality present in society, especially those that are rooted in Christian theology. In his examination of both anti-gay and pro-gay hermeneutics of the Bible, he is able to provide insight into both sides of the debate. He also analyzes the debates between those “constructionists”, who see homosexuality as a chosen identity and “essentialists”, who deem homosexuality to be genetic. These different approaches to understanding human sexuality, especially as they pertain to Christian theology, are discussed in detail throughout this study, and Serwatka’s work is useful in helping articulate many of the key points in contemporary debates about homosexuality.

Sources About Identity

Every person’s identity is shaped by a variety of factors that are either “extrinsic”, dependent upon outside influences, or “intrinsic”, internalized and dealing with matters of self-acceptance. The conflicts that can occur for gay and lesbian Christians on both extrinsic and intrinsic levels are discussed by Eric Rodriguez in his article, *At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians*(2010). His discussion of these conflicts is valuable to this study, in terms of analyzing interview data about how

internal and external conflicts have shaped the interviewees' abilities to be able to reconcile their sexual and Christian identities. He also discusses how gay and lesbian persons have historically been othered by the broader Christian Church, and have not been seen as Christian equals.

Families and faith communities are among the groups that have great influence during a person's developmental years, and it is the ideals these groups hold that become engrained in the minds of the children who grow up in them. Ideals instilled by these groups affect how these children view themselves and the world around them (Garland, 2002). In her work, *Faith Narratives of Congregants and their Families*, Diana Garland examines how children's notions of faith are shaped by their family's viewpoints. Thus, those who grow up in families with strong faith based ties, often share many of the same beliefs and notions about their faith. For the purposes of this research these internalized notions and ideals about the self and faith can be detrimental to those gay and lesbian persons who grow up experiencing contradictory feelings about their sexual orientation and their faith, which in turn can cause them troubles in reconciling their sexual and religious identities.

The notions of what constitute family and what define kinship ties are discussed in Kath Weston's work, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991). She examines reasons why there does not exist a way of defining gay or lesbian kinship, and how the legal system in our society is inherently biased against homosexual persons, as well as discussing the impact such factors have on those whom she interviews. This study confirmed many of her findings, particularly relating to how family and society can shape gay and lesbian persons' concept of self. Many interviewees who participated in this study, like Weston's interviewees, noted the ambiguity of language defining gay partners, i.e. husband or wife, son-in-law or daughter-in-law, etc, and the treatment of gay partners as "outsiders" by their partner's families.

Many who experience conflicts between their sexual and religious identities turn to ex-gay programs to try and “rid themselves” of homosexuality. Michelle Wolkomir describes her work conducting research among persons in an ex-gay program in her work, *Be Not Deceived* (2006). She notes how those who have been impacted by anti-gay viewpoints often experience conflict with their religious and sexual identities, and may feel as though they are sinners, disordered, and often feel that they have let down God, their families, as well as their faith communities. It is precisely these feelings of self-loathing and angst that can cause these individuals to fear for their eternal souls (Wolkomir 2006:4-5). The ethnographic portion of this work documents many of these same feelings were experienced by certain interviewees at given points in their lives as they have progressed in their faith journeys.

In their study, *Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church*, Rodriguez and Ouellette analyze different paths gay and lesbian Christians use in dealing with their sexual and religious identities. By conducting and analyzing interviews among people in one specific gay-positive congregation they found that many had attempted, with varying degrees of success, one or more of ways dealing with their religious and spiritual identities. Their work is perhaps the most important outside source for this study because it is similar in terms of method, and because they name the processes that many interviewees used along their journey towards identity reconciliation. It is also foundational to this work because it extends many of their insights into the gay or lesbian Christian identity by confirming their findings about how these individuals deal with their sexual and religious identities.

Identity politics plays an important role in this research because it allows for exploration of what factors influence the ways in which gay and lesbian Christians negotiate their sexual and

religious identities. Through analysis of various sources this study addresses how the Christian Church as an institution, society, and the family influence the lives of homosexual-Christian persons. Although each person has unique experiences that shape his or her identity, commonalities exist between gay and lesbian Christian individuals regarding factors that have either aided them or hindered them in being able to have a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity.

Other Influential Sources

Other sources that are particularly valuable to this research are the histories, doctrines, policies, and statements of various Christian Church denominations. In analyzing these sources one can see when debates regarding human sexuality began to be topics of discussion, and often hot-button issues, within given denominations. In some cases this analysis allows one to see a change over time, as is the case for the Episcopal Church USA, in accepting gay and lesbian congregants as Christian equals. On the contrary when examining the doctrines, policies, and statements of denominations with anti-gay theologies, like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church, we can see how their anti-gay stances have been further reinforced over the course of time. In examining the histories of denominations like Unity Fellowship Church, one is able to see how various social changes within both the United States and in the Christian community created a need for a place where gays and lesbians could worship without being discriminated against because of their sexuality. Overall, the histories, doctrines, policies, and statements are central to this research because they provide a basis for understanding the affects both pro-gay and anti-gay theologies have had on gay and lesbian interviewees' faith journeys, as well as providing a better understand of the debate regarding homosexuality within the broader Christian community

Chapter 3

Coming to Terms: A Brief History of the Heterosexual/Homosexual Dichotomy

The human body has been a topic discussed in Christianity from the time of the earliest Christian theologians, who were “deeply embedded in Christian communities of intellectual training”, which were to a certain extent informed by Jewish notions of bodily purity found in the Old Testament (Patterson, 2011). The ideas these theologians had about bodily purity were also products of their own culturally relativistic and personal interpretations of Biblical texts. Early theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Peter Damian began describing the body as impure, and as a tool that could corrupt the soul. The Roman Catholic Church, the founding institution of Christianity, incorporated the viewpoints of these early theologians into its doctrine. Subsequently, because the Roman Catholic Church has been a historically powerful institution religiously, culturally, and politically, its notions of morality have influenced Christian societies throughout the ages. Thus, over the course of history Christians adopted many notions about the body that were set forth by these theologians, and such viewpoints have shaped both Christian and to a large extent societal mores about sexual morality.

Before Christianity became a powerful and defining force in the world, “before it was rectified moral commitments, even before it was a community, the Christian faith was explicitly an orientation to the source of life” (Miles 1981: 32). For early Christian theologians this “source of life” was not only centered on eschatological schemes of birth, death, and the eternal soul, but also on the biological functions of the body and sex. Augustine of Hippo was the first Christian theologian to study the human experience, and to analyze concepts of personhood on a multitude

of levels, with particular emphasis on the “body as the spouse of the soul” (Miles 1982: 62). He began theological writings early in his life, but his most influential works: *The Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On Christian Doctrine*, were written in late 300s and early 400s closer to the time of his death. In his writings he describes sin as being perpetuated sexually from the time of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. In his work, *The City of God*, Augustine lays the foundation for what the Roman Catholic Church and subsequently Christian society would regard as “morally correct sexual behavior”. He describes the “evils” of humankind’s nature, with emphasis on the sins of sexual desire and evils of certain sexual acts. In his writings he deems the only sanctioned purpose for intercourse should be the begetting of offspring by stating:

the members created for this purpose should not be stimulated by lust, but should be actuated by his volition, in the same way as his other members serve him for their respective ends (Saint Augustine 1990 :448).

In later chapters Augustine describes sexual intercourse as an act so shameful that it “requires for its consummation darkness and secrecy”, even if the said act is for the single purpose of “the procreation of children” (Saint Augustine 1990, 449). Key focal points in his descriptions of sexual morality are the “laws of nature”, which are rooted in the reproductive capabilities of male-to-female intercourse. It is in these passages he describes the evils of what would later be termed acts of sodomy, and how ultimately such acts defy God’s plan because they do not follow his laws of nature. In these passages Augustine notes these “unnatural” acts can take place between persons of the opposite or same sex, but he places emphasis on male-male relationships. One only can speculate as to why more emphasis was placed on male-to-male sexual relationships. Perhaps it was because of societal notions of what constituted appropriate gender expression, as great emphasis was placed on proper masculine behavior.

Augustine states that “the peace of the body then consists in its duly proportioned arrangement of parts” (1990: 558), and that sexual relations should only occur between the two sexes on which God’s blessing was bestowed (1990: 451). One can gather that when he interpreted scripture he did so in a literal and conservative context, in keeping with his own Jewish and Christian traditions. These interpretations meant the only sanctioned form of sexual intercourse was male-to-female genital intercourse for the purposes of begetting children, which were values incorporated early on into Roman Catholic doctrine. These strict sexual guidelines are still part of an ongoing debate within the Catholic Church today. Augustine uses Romans 1:26, “for this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature” (Rom. 1:26 KJV) in order to support his claims about the “horrible” and “wicked” sexual acts that do not fit within the parameters of male-female genital intercourse.

The early Roman Catholic Church heavily referenced Augustine’s work when establishing its doctrine governing sex, and it was from that time ideals about Christian sexual morality began forming on a world level. Augustine’s works, particularly those discussing the body and sex, as foundational texts for the early Roman Catholic Church, were a source of inspiration for numerous Christian theologians who came after him. Hence, human sexuality in the Christian tradition has been shrouded in a cloak of sinfulness for around 2000 years. Many of those millennia-old notions are the basis for issues regarding homosexuality and its alleged incompatibility with Christian theology today.

For early Christian theologians the word homosexual did not exist as a classification of sexual orientation, or as a way of categorizing sexual behavior. Therefore, a need to label sexual acts that were anything other than the sanctioned male-to-female genital acts was needed by the

early Church to establish regulations for proper penitence and punishment for persons who committed such acts (Jordan 1997: 1). Peter Damian, a theologian, invented the term sodomy in the eleventh century, to describe sexual activity that was anything other than male-to-female genital copulation. His use of the term was meant to be analogous to blasphemy, because he saw those who committed sodomific acts as denying God (Jordan 1997:29). In the eleventh century sodomy became the term of choice used by the Church to classify sexual acts that did not fit within the bounds of reproduction, and the term sodomite used to refer to those that committed these sins.

The word has its roots in the Biblical story of the destruction of the city of Sodom in Genesis 19. This story depicts a tale of two male angels sent by the Lord, who came under the care of a man named Lot, to the city of Sodom that was plagued by all manner of sin. Lot's house, where the two angels were staying, came to be surrounded by "all the people from every quarter", and it is stated the men wanted Lot to bring the angels out "that [they] may know them" (Gen. 19: 1-6 King James Version). Common interpretations of this passage are that the men, who were already known for their male-male sexual violence, were threatening the angels with rape. Historical evidence shows it was common in that time period for men to rape other men who were seen as intruders in order to assert dominance and humiliate trespassers, and thus the purposes of their behavior was not intended for sexual gratification (Carden 1999: 90). This type of sexual violence against their neighbors, differentiated from sexual acts occurring in loving committed same-sex relationships, was one of many sins the Sodomites were guilty of.

In an address to Pope Leo IX, around 1043 C.E., Damian noted a prominent place where such activity was taking place was between clergymen in the Church. He describes such acts committed by sodomites as being worthy of death, and makes statements to the effect that those

who committed such acts to be surely damned to hell (Jordan 1997:45-66). His reductionist approach to interpreting biblical texts is problematic because the Bible never specifically addresses what we would today term homosexual acts in a relationship of mutual love and respect, but rather same-sex sexual activity is addressed when describing acts of sexual violence, like Sodomites threatening the angels of the Lord with rape, or as being cloaked in lust and sins against nature. Over time the Christian Church and various theologians have used the works of Augustine, Damian, and those with like interpretations of Biblical scriptures to classified same-sex sexual acts, particularly those between men, as “unnatural”, “evil”, and “unclean”. The sexual lives of same-sex attracted women was little discussed, perhaps because women’s reproductive sexuality was controlled, e.g. importance placed on virginity before marriage, or perhaps because male-to-male sexual acts were considered to be a compromise of male gender behavioral norms. Thus, in the West religious and societal discrimination against those who are same-sex attracted began centuries ago, well before the term homosexual was coined, medicalized, and incorporated into Christian theology (Jordan 1997:163).

Statements about the moral evils of the sins of the sodomite, including what we today term homosexual acts, were quickly incorporated into Roman Catholic doctrine, and those found guilty of these newly named sins had to seek penitence and/or were subjected to the persecution of the Church. During the Inquisition those found guilty of crimes of sodomy were generally tried and punished by death. The immense power of the Roman Catholic Church extended into the governments of certain countries, e.g. Italy, Spain, and others, where national laws were enacted that made sodomy, which included same-sex sexual acts, illegal. These notions of sin and illegality of sodomy, particularly in reference to male-male sexual acts, began to be perpetuated throughout the world. Despite splitting from the Roman Catholic Church in 1529

based on doctrinal differences, Protestant viewpoints about sexuality were heavily influenced by those of the Roman Catholic Church, and because of this fact they adopted the same stance surrounding the “moral evils” of the sodomite, as well as conservative views about sex in general.

These sexual ideals were brought with Protestants who came to the colonial United States in the 1620s, where erotic activity was focused on the act of reproduction for the purposes of populating and producing workers (Katz 1995: 37). Dominant religious messages being heard at the time were those of Genesis 1:28, “be fruitful and multiply”, and sexual acts that did not fulfill these obligations were strictly denounced by the Church, referring to the Anglican Church and other Christian denominations present in the colonies at the time (Gen. 1-28: KJV). Criminalization of sexual acts that were not for reproduction, or sex within the constraints of marriage, such as acts of sodomy, adultery, and masturbation were deemed punishable by law. Those who were found to have committed acts of sodomy, which at this point still meant anything other than male-to-female genital intercourse, bear in mind this included same-sex sexual acts, were deemed worthy of punishment by death in all of the original colonies (Katz 1995: 37-40). Though colonial sexual values did not divide persons based on what gender they chose to carry out their sexual relations with, there existed strict viewpoints and laws that discriminated against what we today term homosexual sexual acts.

In our society today it is hard to imagine a time when such mutually distinct categories of heterosexual and homosexual were not used as identity markers. Debates about whether or not homosexuality is compatible with Christian teachings has been a hot-button issue in and between Christian Church denominations for decades. The terms heterosexual and homosexual are a recent addition to the ways we categorize the world around us. It was not until the mid-to-late

1800s that these terms emerged, and a dichotomy began to form between those who felt homosexuality was compatible or incompatible began with Christian teachings. Jonathan Katz documents the evolution of the heterosexual norm that came to dominate our society in his text, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995).

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German sexologist and perhaps the earliest gay-rights activist, wrote about same-sex desire in his work, *Researches on the Riddle of Male-Male Love*, published in twelve volumes between 1864 and 1879. In his writing he deems men who love men to possess a male body and the female's sex love for men. Ulrichs, himself a homosexual, argues that these feelings are inborn, and should not be subjected legal punishment (Katz, 51-52). Later in 1868 in a letter between Ulrichs and Károly Mária Kertenby, an Austrian Journalist, Kertenby used the terms heterosexual and homosexual for the first time to describe whether a person was same or opposite gender attracted. In the letter Kertenby described both heterosexuality and homosexuality to be innate, and that for the majority of persons heterosexuality is their innate sexual orientation. Both Ulrichs and Kertenby defended homosexuality, and vehemently opposed laws that punished sexual acts (Endres 2004; Katz 1995: 53-54; Kennedy 2004).

Sexual behaviors labeled as heterosexual did not carry with them the connotations of normalcy they do today until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Also, these categories were not a form of claimed identity as they are today. In the first English publication of his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in 1893, Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, a Viennese psychiatrist, reduced the term heterosexuality to mean a desire for the opposite sex, as opposed desiring both sexes as previously defined by Dr. James G. Keirnan. In his text he describes a variety of pathological sexual behaviors, chief among them homosexual desire. Thus, in the late 1800s Krafft-Ebbing

was one of a few persons who began the early medicalization of homosexuality as a mental condition. He described it as “contrary sexual instinct”, deemed same-sex attraction to be “disgraceful”, and tried to “cure” men and women he worked with from such desire (Katz, 19-32; Hunt 1999: 118-119, 177-178).

Works by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey, and the French philosopher Michel Foucault countered notions that homosexuality was disordered and intrinsically wrong. In his studies about homosexuality Freud opposed viewpoints that homosexuality was in any way degenerate. In his work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, written in 1905, he states:

Inversion [homosexuality] is found in people who exhibit no other serious deviations from the normal...it is similarly found in people whose efficiency is unimpaired, and who are indeed distinguished by specially high intellectual development and ethical culture.

He also takes into account cultures of antiquity, i.e. that of ancient Greece, in which homosexuality was in many way valorized, and what we interpret today as ritual male-to-male sexual acts present among many tribal peoples, (Freud 2000, 4-5). Foucault notes the valorization of homosexuality in ancient Greek culture, and cites Christian theology as being a defining force that has shaped the heterosexual norm present society today, in his multi-volume work, *The History of Sexuality*, written between 1976 and 1984. He argues that the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality that dominate our culture severely limit how we understand ourselves, our history, and others around us. He states:

so many people today affirm this repression, the reason is that it is so historically evident. And if they speak of it so abundantly, as they have for such a long time, this is because repression is so firmly anchored, having solid roots and reasons, and weighs so heavily on sex, that more

than one denunciation will be required to free ourselves from it; the job will be a long one (Foucault 1978:9).

Kinsey devoted his career, spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s, to studying human sexuality, and argued that same-sex sexual acts were a natural form of human sexual expression. He also argued that human sexuality is much more fluid than the categories of heterosexual and homosexual, and that a majority of persons exhibit, to varying degrees, attractions to persons of the same sex. However, the works of Freud and Kinsey were not incorporated into broader psychological and medical doctrines of the time, and homosexuality remained classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychological Association, APA, until 1973. Though Foucault's work is foundational in the study of human sexuality, and in many ways altered the course of the gay-rights movement, it was not published until after homosexuality was stricken from the APA's list of mental disorders

Foucault's work, *The History of Sexuality*, is a foundational text in the study of identity politics, particularly sexual identities. His work was very influential in the gay rights era because it documents how human sexuality has been confined by predominate social and religious norms since the mid-1800s, which have ultimately proved to be repressive towards those whose sexuality is seen as "illegitimate" in the eyes of many in society and in the religious world. His texts in many ways created a space for gay and lesbian persons to publicly claim their sexual identities that was not there previously. This claimed identity is a goal for the social movements that seek gay and lesbian rights, though there are those in society that are upset by people who challenge the socially and religiously sanctioned sexual norms by claiming such a homosexual identity. Foucault notes this point about people who challenge these norms, like those fighting for gay-rights, in his statement:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and

silence, then the mere fact that someone is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language...upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (1978:6).

From the late 1800s and early 1900s the terms heterosexual and homosexual began to make their way into the vernacular of our society, and the word homosexual began to be inserted in place of the words sodomite in Christian theology, the Bible, and homosexual persons became the target of both religious and societal discrimination. Thus, heterosexuality further stressed as the ideal social norm, and the heterosexual/homosexual binary emerged with full force in the 1920s. As Francoer and Katz note, this acceptance of the heterosexual norm reinforced the notions of patriarchy in our society, especially after the Great Depression when our nation went into a period of political, economical, and social conservatism (Katz, 11; Francoer et. al, 15). In the period following World War II a new war was being waged on our own soil against “homosexuals and other sexual ‘deviants’ ” (Rubin 1984:270). In the 1950s homosexuals were viewed by many in American society as being “pedophiles” and “sex-offenders”, which was in no small part due to public service announcements, and governmental policies that furthered such views (Rubin, 269). At this time the American legal system began to adopt laws that were anti-gay in nature, which further reinforced negative societal opinions about homosexual persons. Gay men across the country were accused of being communist supporters. Thus, they were being fired from their jobs and/or arrested, and brutal law enforcement raids were exacted on gay areas and nightspots across the country. Also at that time many Christian Church denominations in the United States supported these negative portrayals of homosexual persons in their messages, and many began to adopt anti-gay theologies and in many ways promote discrimination against same-sex attracted persons (Correa, Petchesky, and Parker 2008: 55-58).

In analyzing the evolution of terms that began the categorization of human sexual behavior, especially as it relates to current issues surrounding discrimination against homosexual persons within the Christian Church, one can understand that the marginalization gay and lesbian persons face today in many Christian church denominations is not the product of a relatively recent societal phenomena. Rather, same-sex attracted persons have been othered by the Christian Church and in society for almost two thousand years. Notions we would today term homophobic began to penetrate western and Christian society because of the writings of early theologians, and the formation of anti-homosexual Christian doctrines. These notions have been ingrained in the minds of people throughout the ages, and still remain powerful today.

There were Christians and non-Christians alike who began to speak out against the oppression and discriminations same-sex attracted persons faced. Beginning in the 1920s the Society for Human Rights was formed to counter the negative sanctions that the gay and lesbian community in the United States at that time was facing. The Stonewall Inn riot on June 27, 1969 catalyzed the gay-rights movement, and issues pertaining to gay rights began to take their place at the forefront of debates in popular society. Demonstrations against the oppression of homosexual persons took place around the country. New social rights organizations emerged that spoke out against the discrimination the gay and lesbian community had been subjected to, and the fight for equal rights for same-sex persons took hold in American society.

Another historical milestone was when homosexuality was officially stricken from the American Psychological Association's list of mental illnesses in 1973. However, with the rise of gay rights group came equally powerful forces that were anti-gay, and largely supported their viewpoints with anti-gay Christian theological viewpoints. The Catholic Church and the majority of mainstream Christian denominations asserted their theological viewpoints that homosexuality

is a sin. Thus, gay-negative messages about homosexual persons have been and are being perpetuated by these churches, which have considerable influence in our society. As a result of being exposed to anti-gay doctrines many gay and lesbian Christians feel conflict between their sexual and religious identities, and have difficulty in reconciling the two. In the following pages this text will explore how doctrines of Christian Churches that have either pro-gay or anti-gay theologies, which can serve to either inhibit or promote the reconciliation of homosexual and Christian identities.

Two Very Different Theologies

Modern Christian theologies are directly tied to cultural, historical, and social processes. Thus, as there have been groups of Christians throughout history that have disagreed on what they believe to be Biblical truths. Issues over sexuality have caused divides within the Christian Church as a whole for centuries, but it has only been within the past century that both pro-gay and anti-gay interpretations of Biblical scriptures have been popularized (Correa et al., 128). As noted above the invention of the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality polarized our society, and the Christian religious world became an even more hostile place for homosexual-Christians, especially as the word homosexual began to take the place of other terms in the Bible. Thus, the majority of mainline Christian denominations began reinforcing notions of the superiority and morality of heterosexuality, which in many ways echoes Foucault's statements that people will speak out against those challenging the sexual norms (Foucault 1978:6)

The following discussion highlights those Christian denominations with pro-gay or anti-gay theologies that are relevant to this study, either because they are representative of viewpoints

encountered by persons whose interviews appear in the text, or because they are historically influential Christian institutions in the United States and/or the in the world.

Christian Denominations With Pro-Gay Theological Perspectives

The Episcopal Church USA

Certain mainline Christian denominations, like the Episcopal Church USA, began to recognize the spiritual rights and needs of the gay and lesbian community during 1970s. For the Episcopal Church USA a shift towards adopting a gay-positive theology began in 1976 at its General Convention, when it passed resolutions to begin the study of “human sexuality (including homosexuality) as it pertains to various aspects of life, particularly living styles, employment, housing, and education”, in particular how homosexuality affects the “wholesomeness” of a candidate for ordination (General Convention 1977: C-110, C-112). At the same time the Church also recognized that “homosexual persons are children of God who have full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church (General Convention 1976: C-109). At proceeding General Conventions of the Episcopal Church USA, began to further address issues pertaining to the ordination of homosexual persons, which was ultimately left to the Bishop and Standing Committee of a particular diocese. The Church has also formed policies that have developed HIV/AIDS support ministries within the Church, and still continues to update their doctrine about issues pertaining to homosexuality.

In 2003 the first openly gay person, the Reverend V. Gene Robinson, was elected the Bishop of the Dioceses of New Hampshire (General Convention 2003 C-045: 222). His election was not without opposition however, and the overall pro-gay stance of the Episcopal Church

USA has caused controversy within the broader Anglican Communion, as noted by the Bishops of the Anglican Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo who stated “we strongly condemn the consecration of Canon Gene Robinson...[and] the access to the priesthood of actively gay and lesbian persons” (Anglican News Service, 2004).

Also in 2003, the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church adopted the document, *The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective*, into the Church’s doctrine. This document explains the Church’s theological perspective on issues concerning homosexuality, and directly addresses issues concerning the morality of homosexual persons, sexual morality in general, the Church’s position on same-sex unions, as well its stance on ordination of homosexual persons (Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, 2003). The message of the document is pro-gay in that it supports the acceptance of homosexual persons as moral Christian equals, and encourages continued dialogue about gay and lesbian issues within the Church and in our nation. Though disagreements exist within the Episcopal Church USA and the broader Anglican Communion about issues regarding homosexuality, the Episcopal Church USA has continued to hold true to their dedication of pursuing religious rights for same-sex attracted persons.

Unity Fellowship

There are Christian Church denominations that emerged out of the gay-rights movement that are “gay-positive”, in that they are “formal Christian institution[s] that preach a positive message about homosexuality and minister specifically to the gay and lesbian community” (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000:336). One such church is Unity Fellowship Church, UFC. It was formed by Reverend Carl Bean, an openly gay African-American, who recognized there was a

need for a Christian ministry that specifically addressed the needs of the gay and lesbian African American community in Los Angeles; gay and lesbian African Americans are a historically doubly marginalized group because of race and sexual orientation. Bean began UFC in his home, and introduced those who came to the ideas of liberation theology, that stressed “opposition to social oppression and advocacy for religious and social justice” (Griffin 2006: 197). At the time in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was no place for African-American gay or lesbian persons to attend services that followed traditional Afro-American liturgical practices (Griffin 2006:187-192). Thus, Unity Fellowship Church was founded in 1982, and has since established congregations in states across the country.

The doctrine of Unity Fellowship is grounded in the principles of Liberation Theology, in that the Church seeks freedom for all persons who have been historically oppressed. Though they recognize and validate other faith traditions, the doctrinal viewpoints of Unity Fellowship Church are based in Christian principles of love set forth in the New Testament (UFC, 2010). Romans 13:10 and 1st John 4:20 are quoted in their statement of belief to provide scriptural examples of God’s messages of love for all of his creation. In their statement, *What We Believe*, one can see their gay-positive theological stance in that they make statements to the effect that a person’s belief system must: promote self-acceptance, support spiritual growth, and encourage personal wellness of physical, emotional, and mental levels (UFC 2010, *What We Believe*). The UFC actively seeks to promote reconciliation on all levels, especially in terms of the gay and lesbian Christian identities.

Christian Denominations With Anti-Gay Theological Perspectives

The majority of Christian Church denominations adopted gay-negative theologies, which specifically denounce homosexuality as sinful and against the will of God, and clearly define homosexuality to be incompatible with Christian teachings. These denominations often limit the ability for openly gay or lesbian persons to be involved in their congregations. They often do not allow openly gay or lesbian persons full membership, or to become leaders in their churches. Another way the denominations with anti-gay theologies mentioned within the context of this paper limit the involvement of openly gay or lesbian persons is by not allowing them to be ordained or become members of the clergy. Though none of these denominations ban homosexual persons from being in their churches, many promote notions that homosexuality is a changeable condition, and urge persons who are same-sex attracted to either actively try to become heterosexual via ex-gay programs and/or counseling, or to lead celibate lives.

Denominations with anti-gay theologies discussed below include the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church. The doctrines, policies, and statements of both the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention are discussed in detail because they have the largest congregations within the United States, and subsequently have a great deal of influence on our society (Francoer et al.1998: 19). The United Methodist Church is discussed because it is the only Christian denomination that subscribes to anti-gay theological viewpoints that does not specifically label homosexuality disordered or sinful, and because there have been and currently are movements within the United Methodist Church urging for the adoption of a pro-gay theological stance (General Conference, 2008). The example of the United Methodist Church shows there are still budding changes within mainline Christian denominations to accept gay and lesbian people as morally upstanding Christian equals.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church deems the “particular inclination of the homosexual person” to be a “strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil”, and officially labels homosexuality a disorder (Vatican 1986: para. 3). Thus, the Catholic Church supports interpretations of the Biblical scriptures that deem homosexual acts to be sinful, and view any one who promotes any other interpretation of the scripture to be “gravely erroneous” and “contradict[ing] the Church’s living tradition” (Vatican 1986, para. 4). Throughout their document, *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care Of Homosexual Persons*, which is incorporated into the doctrine the Catholic Church, they continually denounce homosexual acts as immoral, and use an assortment of Biblical passages to support their opinions on the matter (Vatican1986). In this document the Catholic Church supports the spiritual care of homosexual persons, and state that persons in said spiritual care are not to be influenced by pro-gay theologies that promote acceptance of homosexual persons as living a life acceptable to God. The Church also supports the notion that same-sex attracted persons can be converted from the evils of homosexuality. It calls homosexual Christians who do not or cannot reject their homosexual tendencies to lead a chaste life, so that they can be “save[d] from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them” (Vatican 1986: para. 12). It comes as no surprise then that neither openly homosexual persons nor their supporters are allowed admission to seminary or holy orders (Vatican 2005: para. 1-17). Though the Catholic Church considers itself to denounce homosexuality in a stern but not harsh way, it seems to deem acts of violence committed against homosexual persons to be expected. Evidence of this viewpoint can be seen in the following excerpt from *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care Of Homosexual Persons*, which states:

when homosexual activity is condoned, or civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions [towards homosexual persons] increase” (Vatican 2005: para. 10).

One can see how passages such as this, though not condoning hate crimes, in some way seem to justify the reasons why such violent and horrific acts occur.

The Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention, SBC, offers harsh statements about homosexuality in their doctrine, policies, and statements. In their position statement on sexuality they deem homosexuality to be a sin condemned by the Bible, but nonetheless a sin that can be forgiven if a person rejects his/her “homosexual tendencies” (SBC 2010: Position Statement). The Southern Baptist Convention supports organizations like the National Association of Research and Therapy Of Homosexuality, NARTH, which is part of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Exodus International. Both of these organizations claim to conduct research about the causes of homosexuality, and seek to transform those “suffering” from “homosexual tendencies”/“sexual brokenness”.

In their document, *Homosexuality Your Questions Answered*, the SBC claims a homosexual person simply does not exist, and declares every person to be intrinsically heterosexual (Fellows of The Research Institute of the Liberty and Ethics Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention 2005:2). This document promotes what are commonly known as ex-gay programs, which seek to transform “strugglers who desire to be free” from the sin of homosexuality into heterosexuals, or at least denounce their homosexuality as wrong (Fellows 2005:21). They call for members of their Church to welcome their “sick” homosexual neighbors

into their places of worship and homes to get to know them, and be partners in praying for and aiding them in their redemption process (Fellows 2005: 17-19). The SBC also states, “we are in a reverse tide in our world” today, meaning homosexuality is becoming normalized in our society.

In the same document they propose a number of reasons why same-sex attracted persons and their supporters are misrepresenting the Bible and scientific findings to support the “gay agenda”, as well as providing a plethora of reasons why homosexuality is hurting our society. These reasons include: homosexuality being a destructive lifestyle, same-sex marriage threatening the institution of heterosexual marriage, same-sex parenting exposing children to grave risks, claiming “homosexuality and pedophilia share an arrested sexual and emotional development”, and that “devastation pervades every relationship in which the homosexual man, woman, or child engages” (Fellows 2005:8-15). With the second largest membership base in the United States, it is no wonder anti-gay theology and anti-homosexual attitudes are spread and reinforced across our nation.

United Methodist Church

Of the Churches with anti-Gay theologies mentioned in this study the United Methodist Church, UMC, offers the least demeaning comments regarding homosexuality in its doctrines, policies, and statements. Overall the United Methodist Church labels homosexuality to be “incompatible with Christian teaching” (UMC 2008: What is the denominations position on homosexuality?). However the Church encourages “families and churches not to reject or condemn gay and lesbian members and friends”, and the United Methodist Church states that it is in ministry “for and with all persons” (UMC 2008: ...position on homosexuality). The United

Methodist Church also promotes equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, as well as rejecting homophobia and heterosexism present in our society. At their 2008 General Conference there were heated debates about whether or not to change the denomination's policy that "homosexual practice is 'incompatible with Christian teaching' ", though the policy was not changed (UMC 2008: ...position on homosexuality). At the 2012 General Conference issues concerning homosexuality within the United Methodist Church will no doubt be raised yet again, but as noted by Bishop Neil Irons, "neither supporters nor opponents expect the debate on ordination [of homosexuals] or same-sex unions to end any time soon (Hahn 2011: 33 retired bishops urge to end gay clergy ban).

Remarks On Anti-Gay Theologies

Christian Church denominations with anti-gay theologies often cite statistical information as "evidence" for they view homosexuality to be inherently disordered. One prime example of such rhetoric occurs in the document, *Homosexuality: Your Questions Answered*, 2005, by the Fellows of the Research Institute of the Southern Baptist Convention. In this document they use statistics point to the highest rate of HIV/AIDS being in the gay community, as well as higher rates of depression and related problems among gays and lesbians. Though if we examine this information in a different light, we may see alternative reasons for why these statistics prove true. One could argue the increased prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the gay community and depression among gay and lesbian persons comes from occupying a marginalized sector of society. It is often the case, as noted in the voices of interviewees in the next chapter, that gay and lesbian persons feel at some point a great deal of anxiety about their sexual identities. This anxiety can stem from feelings that they are abnormal or disordered, and/or because of feeling rejected by their families, friends, or faith communities because of their sexual orientation. Thus

two logical conclusions can be drawn. One conclusion is that such feelings can cause gay or lesbian persons, as with many persons affected by rejection, fear, and uncertainty, to become depressed, and act in ways, sexually or otherwise, that put them at risk. The other conclusion is that anti-gay theologies can contribute to feelings of rejection and anxiety that many gay and lesbian Christians experience because they do not affirm for gay or lesbian Christians that God loves them and/or that they are Christian equals.

Pro-Gay and Anti-Gay Biblical Interpretations

Throughout the course of history people have used the Bible as a tool to justify every manner of behavior, from war to sex. Those on either side of the pro-gay or anti-gay theological argument subscribe to very different interpretations of the Bible. Christian denominations with anti-gay interpretations of the Bible typically subscribe to literal interpretations of the scripture, and for them homosexuality is “a clear sign of a godless and failing society” (Serwatka 2010:71). Those who hold such viewpoints are prepared to denounce same-sex attractedness using scriptural passages, which in our culture has led to religious, social, and political oppression of gay and lesbian persons. However, those Christian denominations having pro-gay theologies interpret the same scriptural passages in a different light, and use the Bible as a tool of affirmation of God’s love to all creation, as well as a tool of liberation from oppression.

Christian denominations with anti-gay theologies subscribe to literal interpretations of the Bible, and often do not encourage questioning of biblical texts. They make no mention of the fact that in our modern translations of the Bible the word homosexual has been inserted in place of one or both of the Greek terms *malakoi* and *arsenokites*, which carried with them very different meanings in ancient biblical manuscripts. The term *malakoi* was used in both 1st Corinthians and

1st Timothy to mean self-indulgent or immoral. The term *arsenokites* was used only in 1st Corinthians, and in context probably meant men given to excessive behavior, or possibly as a reference to male temple prostitutes (Serwatka 2010: 77-78). Passages such as Leviticus 18:22, which states, “do not lie with man as one lies with a woman” are used to by many Christian denominations with theologies to promote their anti-gay stance (Lev. 18:22: New International Version). However, there is no mention of the other laws that God gave to Moses in Leviticus chapters 10-26, such as those regarding bodily purity and sacrificial offerings, which are largely ignored today and are not regarded as necessary codes for living a wholesome Christian life. Romans 1:26, “because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another” (Rom. 1:26, NIV), is the only passage in the New Testament that explicitly addresses homosexual acts, and is subsequently the “most commonly used in condemning homosexual behavior” (Serwatka 2010: 78). Another passage those who subscribe to anti-gay theologies use to support their viewpoints is Genesis: 19, which documents the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. They commonly interpret the reason the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed was because of homosexuality, but those who have pro-gay interpretations of the Bible interpret this and the other passages described above in a different light.

Pro-gay theologies take into account translational, historical, and cultural differences that occur when interpreting the bible, as will often encourage biblical exploration. When they encounter passages that address same-sex sexual behavior, like in 1st Corinthians and 1st Timothy, where the word homosexual replaced the Greek terms, they analyze these passages through a historical lens and interpret them according to their original context, which is to say

the men these passages refer to were sinful in that they were self-indulgent and over taken with greed. Pro-gay interpretations of the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis: 19 can be interpreted in either a sexual or non-sexual way. Those who interpret this story in a sexual way deem the Sodomites' violence to be a case of male-on-male rape, which was intended to humiliate the outsiders, who in this case happened to be the angels in Lots care (Carden 1999:190-93, Griffin 2006:25-27, Serwatka 2010:72-74). Those interpreting this passage in a non-sexual way, cite either the King James Version, KJV, or other versions of the Bible, in which the Sodomites state, "bring them out unto us, that we may know them", as opposed to the New International Version, NIV, or other translations that phrase Genesis 19:5, "bring them out unto us so that we can have sex with them". Lastly, for the case of Romans 1:26-27 those with pro-gay interpretations of the Bible take the passage, "exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones", to mean going against one's intrinsic sexual nature. Thus for homosexual persons having a loving and intimate relationship with someone of the same sex would not go against their intrinsic sexual nature, and therefore would not be sinful (Serwatka 2010:79).

As is evident from the discussion above, there are very different interpretations of the Bible, and those on either side of the pro-gay or anti-gay argument use the Bible to support their beliefs. There does not appear to be an end to the biblical debate concerning the compatibility of homosexuality with Christian theology. Thus, many gay and lesbian persons who have significant experience with anti-gay theologies, or who interpret Biblical texts to condemn homosexuality, will most likely continue to question both their homosexual and Christian identities, at least until the voices of same-sex attracted Christians and their supporters are understood and validated by the broader Christian Church, which predominately subscribes to anti-gay theologies. In the following chapter excerpts from interviews with self-identified

homosexual-Christians who have reconciled their religious and sexual identities are given in order to provide an understanding of the struggles many gay and lesbian Christians face, both in terms of challenges to their identities that may present themselves, and in their struggle to be legitimized as Christian equals.

Conclusion

From the discussions of the history of the evolution of anti-gay theologies, clinicalization of homosexuality as a disorder, and social stigma that has been placed on same-sex attraction in United States, one can see how these factors can contribute to identity conflicts gay or lesbian persons may feel between their sexual and religious identities. Factors like these that can cause identity conflict are in no way mutually exclusive, but they are in fact interdependent. Therefore, in order for many gay or lesbian Christians to create a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity they have to negotiate these present them with problems, which often means reinterpreting many of the beliefs and truths they have held for a large part of their lives.

Chapter 4

The Study: Interview Analysis

The ethnographic portion of this study consists of analysis of 13 first hand interviews conducted with openly gay or lesbian persons from two Episcopal Churches, termed Episcopal Church 1 and Episcopal Church 2, and one Unity Fellowship Church, all of which are located within the Atlanta area. The intent of conducting and analyzing these interviews was to gain an emic, i.e. first-hand, perspective about issues interviewees felt affected their ability to achieve a cohesive identity as a gay or lesbian Christian. In analyzing interview data there were certain commonalities that were observed, which interviewees felt either aided or hindered their ability to reconcile their sexuality with Christian theology. However, these commonalities do not discount the uniqueness of each of these persons' faith journeys, i.e. personal histories with the Christian faith. Also, no interviewees noted that their initial goal once they became aware of their sexuality was to forge a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity, ultimately however this was the path that their faith journeys led them too. Though this study is limited in context of quantity and diversity of interviewees, experiences of each of these individuals serve to enhance general knowledge about the gay and lesbian Christian identity, particularly as concerned with reconciliation.

For each of the individuals interviewed, being able to accept himself /herself as both homosexual and Christian did not occur quickly, or without challenge. Rodriguez and Ouellette's four strategies of dealing with identity conflict are used to further document the evolution of participants' journeys of self-acceptance and identity reconciliation (Ouellette 2000: 333-347),

and to provide a general framework in regard to how homosexual persons may deal with religious identity. Other interview data are presented in three sections to show the extent to which family, society, and Christian theology, doctrines, and practices encountered by participants impacted their journeys towards identity reconciliation. This study acknowledges that these categories are intrinsically interdependent. Nonetheless, dividing the data into three sections allows for explanation of how each of these factors has played a role in lives of certain individuals, in terms of coming to terms with his or her sexual and religious identities. The degree to which each interviewee struggled with these factors differed on an individual basis, and each reported varying levels of hardship in terms of being able to reconcile their two identities. Though all noted they had to deal with familial, societal, and with theological issues along their journeys towards reconciliation.

There are two important things to note about the respondents in this study. First is that all interviewees reported being raised in the Christian faith, and in families that placed importance on going to and/or being involved in a church community. Second is that each of these individuals hold unique personal beliefs about their faith, especially in regards to Christian theology, the Bible, and church doctrines. Though each interview cannot be recounted on paper with as much emotion and richness of detail as in person, it is my sincere hope that excerpts from interviews that appear in this text provide an insight into the personal faith journeys of these persons, will add to the general knowledge of the gay and lesbian Christian identity, and highlight the struggles many same-sex attracted religious persons must endure because of the stigma that shrouds their sexual orientation.

Methodology

This study was conducted with interviewees who are congregants of churches in the Atlanta area that are popularly known to be inclusive of gay and lesbian persons, both in terms of doctrine and praxis. In order to determine which congregations to draw interviewees from, I attended services at several Episcopal Churches, one Unity Fellowship Church, and one United Church of Christ, all of which subscribed to what this study terms pro-gay theologies. I then selected the congregations I felt had the largest openly gay populations, and contacted the heads of the given congregations to ask their permission to conduct interviews with willing openly gay and lesbian congregants. Upon speaking individually with the rectors of both Episcopal Church 1 and Episcopal Church 2, it was decided that they would contact persons they thought would be willing to participate in this study. They agreed to contact a diverse group of person in terms of age and gender. In speaking with the assistant pastor of the Unity Fellowship Church congregation, we determined that she would spread the word to members of her congregation through speaking with them directly, as well as announcing the context of my work during services. I regret only having three interviews from the persons of this Unity Fellowship congregation. Others congregants approached me who were willing to participate, but unfortunately it was after I had finished conducting interviews.

Upon hearing from persons who expressed a willingness to be interviewed, I was able to arrange to interview them at locations of their choosing. The interviews were recorded on tape, and ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours. A semi-structured interview format enabled me to collect essential data about a person's life history and journey with the Christian faith, as well as being able to delve into topics of discussion the interviewee felt were important in the context of his/her personal narrative.

Demographics of Interviewees

All interviewees, with the exception of the heterosexual rector from Episcopal Church 1, identified themselves as either gay or lesbian and Christian, felt comfortable being open about their sexuality in their respective congregations, and indicated they are out to their immediate and/or extended family and certain friends, which were criterion used by this study to classify individuals who had a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity. Another fact to note about interviewees is that none were under the age of 30, as I did not recruit interviewees directly the reasons for why there were no younger participants are speculative. The voices of younger interviewees would have been valuable to this study because identity conflicts may have been fresher in their minds. With the exception of one person from Episcopal Church 1, all interviewees from that congregation either were serving or had served at the church as members of the vestry, lay leaders, staff, choir members, etc. Those whom I interviewed at Episcopal Church 2 indicated they had been actively involved in the church community for a number of years, and one of these interviewees was serving on the vestry of the church. The three interviewees from the Unity Fellowship congregation noted they had been active in the congregation for a number of years. One was serving as pastor, and another as the assistant pastor.

Below, in *Table 1.*, is the demographic breakdown of interviewees, which is divided by congregation attended, sex, and age. One key point to note about race for the purposes of this study is that Unity Fellowship Church was founded to be a church home for gay and lesbian African Americans, “who value the black worship experience”, and therefore historically has had a predominately African American membership base (Griffin 2006:187). Denise, Joseph, and Melinda, who are all African American, each noted the Black Church, i.e. churches that minister

predominately to African American congregations, and follow African American worship styles and traditions, as being instrumental in their faith lives from childhood. They also noted the Black Church as being a factor that has had profound effects on their faith journeys. Race would otherwise not be mentioned for the purposes of this study.

Table 1. Demographics of Interviewees

Name	Sex	Age Category	Congregation
Catherine	Female	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Conner	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Denise	Female	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Deric	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 2
Don	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 2
Elder	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 1
Elise	Female	50-70	Episcopal Church 2
James	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Joachim	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Joseph	Male	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Melinda	Female	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Paul	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 1
Van	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 2

The Congregations

In an interview with the Rector of Episcopal Church 1, who is the only heterosexual person interviewed, he shared with me many of his own personal feelings about homosexuality, both in a broader Christian Church context and within the context of his parish. He noted that debates about homosexuality within the Episcopal Church had “been the most consistent debates throughout [his] ordained ministry”, and that when he came to his current parish in the late 1990s he learned “that the words gay or lesbian [had never] actually been used publicly in sermons, bulletins, or anything else”, despite the church having “a fairly significant gay and lesbian population who were out, comfortable, and present”. However, he felt issues that pertained to homosexuality within the parish could not be ignored, but rather had to be addressed. He stated, “we’d always been very good at tolerance, but now we are talking about affirmation”. He also recognized “there is still a very destructive kind of self-hating side to much of the gay and lesbian culture... having to do with the internalization of prejudice and that sort of thing”.

In a meeting with gay and lesbian persons from his parish he was able to learn that they “wanted to be accepted as normal, not just integrated into the life of the parish and as a separate tribe”. Thus, he began to address gay and lesbian issues within the church, and along with the governing body of the parish created a group, which would serve the gay and lesbian community of the parish and to welcome same-sex attracted persons to the church. Though he acknowledged the group had to some extent served as a “primary community for some people”, in that many gay and lesbian congregants tend to socialize mainly with others from the group. He stated the overall purpose of the group remains “a very clear signal on our website, and in our publications, and elsewhere for [gay and lesbian] people who are looking [for a church] that this is an okay place”, meaning that same-sex attracted persons are welcomed and affirmed in the parish. He

noted issues of homosexuality and its compatibility with the Christian Church in general and within his congregation “[are] never going to be a consensus issue[s]”, but for the purposes of his congregation recognized he needed to lead and “create a space for [gay and lesbian] people [to be] in a community that talks about what’s really important, which is that we are of infinite worth because we are made by love for love”.

One interviewee, Paul, noted how the parish has changed over time to become more inclusive of gay and lesbian persons, especially upon the arrival of the current rector. He stated, “the parish was, in 1977 when I left to go to seminary, a rather conservative parish...its very different [now], and I think it shows the change that you see kind of here in the city in the acceptance of the gay [and lesbian] community”. From descriptions of the parish given by other interviewees, I was able to conclude that they feel as though it is a safe and supportive Christian community in which they can open about their sexuality without fear of discrimination, and it is a place where diverse opinions are welcomed. James noted that Episcopal Church 1 is the Christian community in which he and his partner are going to continue raising their daughter. He stated, “there’s a great group of kids that [she] is going to grow up with here”. In attending four 11:15am services at Episcopal Church 1, affectionately referred to by many interviewees from the congregation as the “gays and grays service”, I heard messages of acceptance and love for all from the pulpit, and noted the presence of many openly gay and lesbian persons sitting with their partners and/or children, as well as the presence of the many older persons, “the grays”.

Attempts were made to conduct an interview with the rector from Episcopal Church 2, however we were unable to meet for an interview. Based upon participant observation, which included attending four worship services, and from interviewee descriptions, I was able to conclude that Episcopal Church 2 is an open and affirming towards gay and lesbian persons. In

attending worship services I noticed several same-sex couples, some with children, and noted the general inclusiveness of the church. I saw same-sex couples share affection with one another during the portion of the service in which members of the congregation greet one another; there seemed to be no overt objection by other congregants. Van noted:

Since '95 I believe it was. That's about the time I started going. And one thing that was neat about going to [Episcopal Church 2] is people would ask me, how did you hear about [us]. I said I was looking for a place that was gay friendly and that was involved in HIV/AIDS [ministries]. And they said, then you have come to the right place. In fact, anyone old/young, gay/straight, male/female I asked that [question to], or that [question] came up, they would say the same thing. I thought maybe they'd all been rehearsed, but...in other words, they thought you've come to the right place. And I did, I had come to the right place, and it's just been a great place and a great community.

All other interviewees from that congregation echoed his sentiments about the welcoming and affirming nature of the parish.

Two of the three interviews conducted with persons from Unity Fellowship were with the heads of the church, and therefore elicited information pertaining to the ministries and viewpoints concerning homosexuality present in their particular congregation. Both Joseph, the pastor, and Denise, the assistant pastor, acknowledged the affirmation of same-sex attracted persons in the Unity Fellowship tradition, and in their own congregation. Joseph remarked that his congregation's "hay day" was between 2002 and 2005. He stated, "we had between 75-100 members, partially because we were the only game in town, particularly for folks that wanted a church service more in line with the African American traditional style of church worship", and that these men and women felt they could not go back to their original place of worship, if they had one, because of their sexual orientation. He stated that his goal as pastor is to break down the stereotype that church and homosexuality "are not supposed to blend", and to "move people out

of internalized homophobia and into a really healthy self-acceptance of who they are". Denise mirrored these sentiments in her statement:

I think that the one important thing to me is that people understand that Christian is not a bad word for those that have been hurt by church, and for those that use the Bible and or church doctrine to hurt others that there are those of us who are who we are, we love God, we follow Christ and we get to claim that title as well.

I attended six worship services at Unity Fellowship, and heard the messages of love and hope that Joseph and Denise preach to their congregation. The core of many of these messages was that God loves all of his creation regardless of sexual orientation, and that same-sex attracted persons can lead upstanding Christian lives. The congregation of this particular Unity Fellowship Church is predominately made up of African American women, though there are a handful of men I saw in attendance each time. Children are also a vital part of this community. A large portion of the congregation consists of same-sex attracted persons, many of whom attend with their partners or spouses; Unity Fellowship Church blesses same-sex marriages. There was a rich sense of community which I felt during the services I attended, perhaps because of the small size of the congregation, I documented between 30-60 people present at each service, and because part of the worship service involved every person making his or her way throughout the room to share hugs and words of affirmation with one another.

Strategies of Identity Reconciliation and Cross-Analysis with Rodriguez and Ouellette

A Cross-Analysis With Interview Data From This Study

In their study, *Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church*, Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Ouellette label “four general categories of identity work in which gays and lesbians might engage to alleviate conflict between their homosexual and religious identities” (2000:334). Like Rodriguez and Ouellette, I found that interviewees employed one or multiple forms of these strategies in dealing with their two identities at various points in their lives. I found that each interviewee used multiple strategies on his/her journey towards reconciliation. The final strategy for all persons who were interviewed has been identity integration, and the formation of a cohesive homosexual-Christian identity.

Rejection of the religious identity, as defined by Rodriguez and Ouellette, encompasses rejecting Christian beliefs, or becoming involved in another religion that does not hold beliefs that conflict with the individual’s sexuality (2000:334). In this study only one respondent, Denise, employed this method of dealing with the conflict between her sexual and religious identities. In her response Denise stated:

I studied and practiced Wicca for a while, and studied Buddhism and thought maybe that’s my path. But you know, ultimately I love church, I love Christianity, I love Black Church, that’s my tradition.

In the context of the interview she noted the reason she studied and practiced these alternate traditions was because as she said was receiving messages, both explicit and implicit, from churches she was attending with anti-gay theologies that her sexuality was wrong. However, she

felt a need to come back to the Christian tradition she loves, and through therapy, studying the Bible and Christian theology for herself, as well as finding an affirming church home she came back to her Christian faith, a process she noted was “*agonizing*”.

Other respondents discussed periods of their lives when they did not attend church, for various reasons, which included being in college, not having the time, or feeling spurned by their particular Christian community, but found they related to God and Christianity in their own personal way. James noted when he went away to college he stopped attending services regularly, which for him was a departure from being actively involved in the Methodist Youth Fellowship group at his home church. Though some respondents began to distance themselves from their respective churches because they felt a conflict either between their sexuality and/or various other theological viewpoints held by their given congregations, or by the broader Christian Church that by-and-large holds anti-gay beliefs, subscribed to. Don noted, “I think as a teenager...even though I was very closeted and didn’t want to think about the gay part, somewhere in there I realized...that I felt a tension between the two [his sexuality and Christian beliefs]”, and describes this tension as something that caused him to “ditch church” for a long period of time. In our interview Catherine noted she felt tension between what she believed to be true about her faith and the viewpoints professed by the Presbyterian Church she grew up in. These conflicts caused her to separate from the institutional Christian Church for a number of years, though during this time she still felt she remained connected to God and her own belief system. She stated:

the Christian faith was just a foundational vocabulary in my life. It was the way, you know, I was taught about right and wrong and love and joy, and you know all of those things. And so it was just, you know...I’m never going to be able to get rid of this. I can’t turn Hindu or something

because that's just not a live vocabulary for me, so I'm gonna have to try to work within these confines because it's just hardwired into my brain...

Others, like Conner, continued to be actively involved in their respective Christian faith communities, despite feeling at odds with their sexuality. Conner noted:

Even when I was going through a phase where I felt really guilty and uncomfortable about God, and how I was being viewed by God, I felt even worse not being in church somewhere. So when I was in college I was still in church every Sunday.

Thus, for all of the individuals in this study abandoning the Christian faith was something they ultimately could not do because of being immersed in Christianity from childhood, and because of the profound importance their faith has played in their lives.

Rejecting the homosexual identity, as defined by Rodriguez and Ouellette, means that “the person with the homosexual identity seeks to become heterosexual”, which is commonly through taking part in ex-gay programs, or by being sexually abstinent (2000:334). Joseph was the only interviewee who reported any experience with an ex-gay program. While eleven out of thirteen interviewees reported that they had tried to have heterosexual relationships, mostly at earlier points in their lives, such as adolescence and young adulthood. Three of the thirteen respondents had been married to someone of the opposite sex at some point in their lives.

Joseph, who had been married to someone of the opposite sex, immersed himself in an ex-gay program offered by Exodus International to try and rid himself of his homosexual sexual orientation. The ex-gay program he noted, “*confirmed for me that I was a gay man*”. He also pointed out that he tried “some real work around deliverance [from homosexuality]” in an Apostolic Church, but this process did not work for him. When Joseph left this particular church still feeling the attraction to the same-sex he noted in his statement that the pastor said demeaning statements to him. Joseph stated:

I can remember him [the pastor] saying one of the most painful things I have ever heard a preacher say to me. He says, you know if you don't get delivered and really renounce this [speaking of Joseph's sexual orientation], you're going to contract AIDS and you'll be dead in two years; I promise you.

These comments were devastating for him, but he remarked, “eventually I realized he [the pastor] was just crazy and I left it [the notion of trying to be delivered] alone”.

Other respondents reported attempting heterosexual relationships at certain points in their lives because they were uncomfortable identifying as homosexual, which was the result of religious and or societal norms that they felt affirmed to them that their sexuality was wrong. The ways in which these norms affected their reconciliation process will be discussed later in this chapter.

Compartmentalization refers to a strategy of dealing with identity conflict in which a person keeps their two conflicting identities rigidly separate, which for gay and lesbian people means keeping their sexual and faith lives separate (2000:334). Three respondents, Conner, Deric, and Joseph reported having same-sex relationships and/or same-sex attractions while simultaneously being actively involved in their respective churches, and trying not to allow their sexuality to enter into their church and/or religious life. Though each reported feelings of guilt or angst that stemmed from incongruities they felt between their religious beliefs and being involved in a same-sex relationship. Conner states:

I was kind of being who I was supposed to be, but still feeling guilty about it because I have the Church over here and God telling me—God wasn't telling me—but God was telling me that I was wrong. So it was really difficult. It was like living a double life...I felt like when I left the theater to go back to the church world I had to be a completely different person, and I had to turn off everything that I was...going back and forth between those two worlds on an almost daily basis was really difficult...very stressful.

Both Deric, who was involved in his Southern Baptist Church as a Sunday school teacher, and Joseph, who was the pastor of a Pentecostal Church, acknowledged being in closeted gay relationships, and not being open in their respective congregations about their sexuality. They felt they had to keep their sexual orientations to themselves because the Christian traditions in which they were immersed in at the time were vehemently anti-gay in their theological perspectives. The extent to which other interviewees tried to keep their sexual and religious lives separate was not discussed in their interviews.

Identity reconciliation is the final strategy discussed by Rodriguez and Ouellette. It involves the integration of the homosexual identity and Christian identity “into a single, new, workable understanding of the self”, and therefore individuals no longer feel a conflict between the two identities (2000:334). At the time when I conducted interviews each of the participants felt as though they had come to a place in their lives and faith journeys where they no longer felt there was any sort of significant tension between their sexual and Christian identities, and had worked towards achieving a harmonious gay-Christian identity. They had all dealt with years of struggling with their sexuality and societal norms, coming out to family and friends, as well as grappling with, learning about, and forming their own Christian belief system. Having a reconciled gay-Christian identity was noted as a positive force in the lives of interviewees, and all claim to have a greater understanding of themselves and their faith as a result. Joseph spoke of the moment in which he realized that his sexual and religious identities no longer had to remain in conflict with one another, he stated:

I love God more than anything else in life, and when God was snatched away from me, it felt like my entire breath was snatched from my body. Even now as I talk about it, I can feel that moment [though] I was not

clear I was okay. What I was clear [about] was that I could be [okay], and that I could have God back again,

speaking of the moment he realized that his sexual and religious identities no longer had to remain in conflict with one another.

Familial, Societal, and Christian Theological Impacts

On Participants' Lives and Journeys Toward Reconciliation

There are many influences that shape a person's identity and concept of self over the course of a lifetime. Each of the interviewees who lent their voices to this study consistently noted that their families, societal norms and expectations, as well as Christian doctrine, theology, and practices they encountered had all played roles in shaping their identities as gay or lesbian Christians. The roles that these three factors play are also addressed in Kath Weston's work, *Families We Choose: Lesbian, Gays, Kinship* (1991), in which she discusses notions of family and kinship, the role of the coming out process for homosexual persons, and to some extent the role faith played in the lives of certain interviewees. These three factors have to varying degrees served to either inhibit or promote feelings of identity incongruity that each of the interviewees acknowledged they had felt between their sexual and/or faith identities. Such factors that cause identity conflict for gay and lesbian persons of faith "are both extrinsic, coming from outside the individual and more dependent on acceptance by others, and intrinsic, coming from within the individual and generally held as internalized moral ideals" (Rodriguez 2000:10). Neither extrinsic causes of identity conflict nor intrinsic causes of identity conflict are mutually exclusive of one another, in that extrinsic causes that promote identity conflict or reconciliation can be the source of intrinsic conflict or serve to promote emotional healing. Thus, in analyzing the interview data I found these three factors had caused both extrinsic and intrinsic conflict between

each of the interviewee's sexual and religious identities, and to varying extents one or more of these factors had served to promote reconciliation between these two identities.

Family

Each of the participants reported that their families had played a large role in their lives in terms of shaping their faith, as they all grew up in Christian families, and either hindering or promoting their ability to reconcile their homosexual and Christian identities. Because each of these individuals was raised in Christian families that participated in a church community, Christianity became for them, as noted by Catherine, "*a foundational vocabulary*" for their lives. She stated, "that it [Christianity] is who I am because this was the context I was born into, so I have to make something out of this". Many of the interviewees echoed Conner's statement, "we were at church every Sunday as far back as I can remember". With the exception of Joachim, who was raised in the Episcopal Church, every interviewee grew up in Christian denominations that subscribed to anti-gay theologies.

The extent to which families had an impact on interviewee's faith lives as they got older and reported renegotiating their belief system is unclear. Van, who was raised Southern Baptist, reported that his parents felt hurt when he began to go to attend an Episcopal Church because it was not in keeping with the traditions of his family. Conner, who was raised Methodist, stated:

I think once I became an Episcopalian they [his parents] didn't really know how to talk to me about my faith. Because all of a sudden that was different, and in some respects think that may be more different than my homosexuality.

All respondents noted the affect their families had on their religious lives declined as they grew older, and none of the respondent noted support from their family as having dramatically affected, either positively or negatively, their religious lives after they came out. However this

finding does not discount the impact families had on planting the seeds of the Christian faith early on in respondents' lives.

One key area that all participants noted was a source of angst for them was coming out to their families. None of the respondents came out to their families prior to adulthood, most during or after their twenties, and a majority noted that the process involved a great amount of anxiety caused by the fear they would be rejected. Reasons why these individuals came out to their families included feeling that it was necessary for their families to know the truth about their sexuality, being involved in a relationship, getting divorced, contracting HIV/AIDS, or being outed by someone. The order in which respondents came out to family members varied greatly from person to person, as some came out to siblings or grandparents before their parents. The methods in which interviewees came out to their family members also varied from person to person, and included coming out in face-to-face discussions, writing letters, or coming out over the phone. The responses their families had to their coming out also varied a great deal. A clear correlation between family members reactions based upon the strictness of their belief cannot be drawn generally for the whole of the interview population.

Catherine, who described her mother as a fundamentalist, described her coming out process by stating, "it was all bad...it was really all bad", and to this day she says she finds it difficult to talk about her sexuality with her mother.

Joseph's description of coming out to his mother, whom he described as being a fundamental Pentecostal, was one of great emotional pain. This is his description of what she said to him, "if I had known this is who you were going to be, I would not have bothered". He was hurt and saddened by this comment, and he stated "it was almost as if she had put a knife in

my chest...we went for a year without speaking... it was so painful”. Though today he noted that his mother has worked through a great deal of her homophobia, and the two have a good, yet still strained, relationship.

James, who told his evangelical sister about his sexuality before telling his parents, and that his sister had a much harsher reaction than his parents, who were very supportive of him. His sister cried because she believed he was going to go to hell, he noted she still takes issue with his sexuality. He remarked, “her whole thing was it’s definitely a choice, I always wanted to do something different, I was always trying to be cutting edge, and [involved in] some new fad”. Though he did not mention how he felt about having what he knows to be the truth about himself questioned and even denied by his sister.

Other interviewees reported similar stories of family members being upset by their coming out, which they acknowledged took time for both themselves and their family members to deal with, especially in regards to expectations and prejudices certain family members had. At the time of the interview process the majority of respondents noted that their relationships with family members that were to a certain extent broken by their coming out have healed, though many of these relationships have been fundamentally changed as a result of the interviewee acknowledging his or her sexuality. Conner noted that the relationship he has with his parents is still strained because of his coming out. He remarked, “my mother will hug me, but its almost like a chore...and my dad won’t even shake my hand.

For all coupled persons, with the exception of Elise, they noted that parents or other family members to some extent did not and/or still do not acknowledge the validity of their same-sex relationships. Weston, notes this finding in her text as well, and cites possible reasons

why the families of gay or lesbian persons may not legitimize their relationships. These possibilities include that there currently does not exist kinship patterns for gay families or partnerships, or because family members choose not to legitimize relationships by using terms generally applied to heterosexual ones can do so as a way to show their disapproval (Weston 1991:215-265, 1034).

In the cases of Don and Deric, and James and his partner, who also shares the same name, certain family members did not attend their commitment ceremonies as a way of showing their disapproval. Deric noted with, “a lot of people had issue with... invitations saying this is a commitment ceremony”. He and Don both noted the absence of certain family members at their ceremony, key among them Don’s mother and his two brothers-in-law. James noted that his sister and her husband were not present at he and his partner’s ceremony, though she and her husband did directly address them to tell them that she and her husband would not be coming prior to the ceremony. James recalls:

they called us and asked us to come [to their home]...to sit with us and talk to us about it... [they]wanted us [James and I] to know that they love us very much, but they could not condone what we were doing, our relationship...and so they were not going to be able to come.

James, Melinda, Catherine, and Joseph all noted feeling that certain members of their families or their partners’ families did not treat their partners in the same manner they treated the spouses of heterosexual relatives. James noted his sister “didn’t want the girls [her daughters] calling James Uncle James”, and acknowledged she has not discussed he and his partner’s relationship with her children. Melinda noted a similar case in which her brother has not discussed with his children the context of her and Denise’s relationship. She discovered her eleven year nephew did not know about the extent of her relationship with Denise while they

were playing a board game, Life. During the game she wanted a pink peg, female, instead of a blue peg, male, to signify her spouse, but she noted, “he gave me that look like, auntie, no...so that to me was devastating”. Catherine remarked that when she went to her ex-partner’s parent’s house, over the course of a ten year period, for holidays and other occasions “it is just like she’s [her ex-partner] is bringing her friend home to visit the family, so I’m not the daughter-in-law...it’s a really different status”. Joseph noted that his mother intentionally did not mention his partner when they were having conversations, but that she has to an extent become more accepting of he and his partner. He stated, “it was too obvious that she was just intentionally not mentioning him, then it would be tell your friend hello, then slowly but surely she graduated...to calling him by his name”.

Another important point to note about interviewees in the 50-70 age category is that they did not come out until later in their lives, post-Stonewall. Weston notes the shifting societal norms about sexuality and coming out in her text. She states:

Only in the wake of gay liberation did deliberately disclosing one’s sexual identity to biological or adoptive relations become structured as a possibility...according to the historical periodization this separates the “old gay” from the “new gay”...homosexuals before Stonewall did not dare reveal their sexual identities to others for fear of criminal prosecution, incarceration, and loss of employment (1991:717).

James, Van, Elise, and Paul all noted that they did not come out to their families until they were well into adulthood, which was post-Stonewall. Both James and Van came out as a result of being HIV positive, for both of these men the coming out process was doubly challenging because they had to inform their family members not only of their sexuality, but about their HIV positive status as well. Both noted that it took their families time to process the news, but that they received support and encouragement from them. Elise came out to her family

after she got divorced from her husband of twenty-eight years, in order to live out her life in a way that would be true to herself. She cited that she received the love and support of her family members, and that when she became partnered her family welcomed her partner as an equal part of the family. For Paul, who is an ordained in the Episcopal Church, he came out to certain family members only after he had spoken with counselors, and began to accept his sexuality as being created by God, which for him was well into adulthood.

Remarks About The Role Of Family In Shaping Identity

For those who lent their voices to this text all acknowledged that their upbringing in various Christian denominations has played a vital part in their journey with Christianity, and has contributed in some fashion to their current identities as gay-Christians. Coming out to their family is another process that all described as being important in their lives, and enabled them to progress in their lives in all capacities, even in terms of dealing with their faith, regardless of whether or not their parents or family supported them. From this data it can be seen that family played a crucial role in the formation of a reconciled gay or lesbian Christian identity for those who participated in this study, both in terms of establishing the role of Christianity early on in their lives, and because during the coming out process interviewees were able to break down major barriers that hindered them from having a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity, according to the definition of this study.

Society

Every interviewee mentioned notions of appropriate gender behavior and societal norms as factors that affected their process of forming a cohesive homosexual-Christian identity. One way in which society affects this process for many gay and lesbian individuals is because of the popularly held notions that “sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard”, the heterosexual standard (Rubin 1984: 283). As evident from interview data such notions had been impressed upon interviewees since childhood, and many had to struggle with overcoming societal stigma before being able to accept their sexual identities. Elise and Joachim echoed this point, and noted that the struggles they encountered coming to terms with their sexual identities were rooted in societal expectations. It was often the case for interviewees that they found societal stigma to be supported by the anti-gay theological viewpoints upheld by many of their former churches.

Melinda, who described herself as always being a tomboy, noted she has aligned herself since childhood with activities and a way of dress many in broader society often deem masculine. She noted, “in Black Church if you are a butch woman or an aggressive woman, you are taunted and chastised because of your presence”. She also remarked that when she came home from college after she came out her mother would try and make her wear a dress to church.

Conner noted that high school was an especially difficult time for him because he was bullied, called names like fag and sissy. He stated, “the more I was called those names, the more it just convinced me that it [my sexuality] was wrong, ...and that I was a bad person. So that was a rough time...I’m still coming to terms with a lot of it. Fortunately I am coming to terms with it

in a positive way”. He also noted that during this time his feelings that God thought his behavior was wrong further contributed to his inner struggles with his sexuality because he was feeling “guilty and oppressed”.

All interviewees noted trying to hide or repress their sexuality to some extent because they were uncomfortable admitting to themselves and others that they were homosexual, or felt in some way that their behaviors were against societal norms. All but two interviewees reported being in some sort of heterosexual relationship in order to be “normal”. Though the extent to which interviewees acknowledged these opposite-sex relationships as being sexual varied from individual to individual. Joseph noted he wanted to keep his sexuality hidden because it would not have been acceptable to in his faith community at the time. He stated, “I did not want to be homosexual, I wanted to be normal, I wanted to be able to do what I felt everyone else was doing”. The majority of other interviewees who hid and/or earnestly tried to dismiss their homosexual orientation by having heterosexual relationships echoed his statement.

Both Elise and Van noted that they kept their sexualities hidden because of the time periods in which they came of age, which was pre-Stonewall. Elise noted, “being raised in the 40s and 50s I just followed the regular model for dating boys”. Van, noted he did not attempt to get married to cover up his sexuality and did not come out until he was around age forty. He stated:

I certainly didn't give myself away because back then, in the early 60s, it just wouldn't have been the thing to do. And a lot of people in those days did things like get married as a kind of cover thing. I wouldn't have done that because frankly I wouldn't have thought I could have held up my side of the marriage with a female...and so I would have either done nothing or done gay stuff all along because I just didn't imagine I could do that...So I was right to do that [meaning not getting married].

Three of the four interviewees over the age of fifty and certain younger respondents noted they felt societal stigma that surrounded homosexuality as being a mental disorder, some even noted this stigma impacted how they viewed themselves. This stigma they felt was due largely to the American Psychological Association's classification of homosexuality as a mental illness until 1973. This classification further reinforced negative societal stereotypes about homosexual persons. These stereotypes have resulted in many gay lesbian persons "have[ing] difficulty with their own self-acceptance and the process of deciding just how to live as a gay or lesbian person" because of the societal stigma that surrounds their sexual orientation (Francoer et al. 1998:153). Van noted that his first assignment in the navy, in the 1960s, was "helping to tie up this very lengthy report about kicking out six guys because they were gay", and he noted these men were labeled mentally disordered. Elder noted that his father asked, "when did you first realize something was wrong?", when he came out to him. His father's response can be attributed to societal and Christian religious stigma he had encountered, and subsequently adopted, which deemed his son's sexuality a wrong or disordered. Catherine, who is in her forties, noted that she initially felt that her being attracted to the same-sex was "psychologically abnormal", and noted that her mother viewed her sexuality, as being "basically like a mental illness". Still others noted that when they became aware of their same-sex sexual attraction they felt that something was wrong with them, and felt at odds with their sexual because they were not "normal", i.e. heterosexual.

For those interviewees who were younger, and were coming of age and/or coming out in the 1980s and early 1990s, they had to deal with the stigma surrounding homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. Gay men have historically been the most at risk group for contracting HIV, and

because of this fact it has painted by many as the “gay disease” (Francoer et al.:159-160, Rubin 1984: 280-299, Correa et al. 2008). Thus, this epidemic furthered a great deal of negative stereotypes people in broader society had about homosexuality in general. Such stereotypes were addressed by Melinda who stated her mother thought that “to be a gay or lesbian person was, you know, no God, you know sex and clubbing, partying, just abandoning everything she thought was Christian that you’d been taught”. Though none of the women addressed the issue of stigma surrounding their sexuality and HIV/AIDS, perhaps because lesbians have the lowest rates of sexually transmitted diseases of any orientation group (Francoer et al. 1998:160).

Seven out of nine men interviewed addressed issues of stigma they encountered because they were homosexual. James noted that in the early 80’s he had concerns about coming out because as he stated, “AIDS was in the forefront, being gay was still a very alternative lifestyle...it was kind of a marginalized kind of thing. Joachim noted that his parents had fears of him contracting HIV/AIDS, as well as fears that he would experience discrimination because of his sexuality. He did note that he experienced discrimination because of his sexual orientation. He stated, “I was turned down for a job because I was gay, and they asked me point blank and I didn’t lie, ...they just said, no thank you”.

It is evident from interview data that societal notions of sexuality contributed greatly to shaping each of the interviewees’ sexual and/or religious identities. The heterosexual norm that has historically prevailed in our society in many ways challenged their ability to accept themselves as homosexual persons. Thus, in being able to successfully confront societal norms by accepting their sexuality they were able to progress further down the path of identity reconciliation.

The Impact of Christian Theologies, Doctrines, and Practices

The extent to which Christian doctrines, theologies, and practices impacted interviewees' journeys towards reconciliation varied from person to person. Some interviews reported having relatively minor conflicts between their sexual and Christian identities. These interviewees noted that early on in their lives, for some in preadolescent years, having developed a more individualistic relationship with their faith, which was not mediated by doctrines and theologies of various Christian Church denominations. On the other hand there were interviewees who noted that their process of self-acceptance, and the reconciliation of their sexual and religious identities, was difficult because of their exposure to traditions with anti-gay theologies.

Many who had experiences with Christian denominations that held anti-gay theologies stated they never heard overtly negative messages from their respective churches speaking out against homosexuality. Though they acknowledged feeling the subtleties in these messages, and/or from reading biblical texts that made them feel their sexuality was in conflict with their faith. Elise noted a possible reason for not hearing anti-homosexual messages in her church by stating, "it was sort of like we don't have to preach against murdering somebody because you're not gonna murder anybody". Though, there were interviewees who noted hearing extremely negative messages preached from the pulpits of their former church homes. Joseph noted he heard messages that described homosexuals as "hell bound", "definitely out of God's will", and that labeled homosexuals "perverted, just nasty individuals, and demon possessed".

A commonality between interviewees who reported that reconciliation of their sexual identities and their faith identities were, to varying extents, less trying than for other participants,

is that they began questioning and negotiating ideas they found troublesome about their faith at an early age, for most either in childhood years or early adulthood. Even though they reported reconciling their two identities was less of a struggle, it does not mean that they never felt tension between their sexual and religious identities.

Joachim, the one interviewee who grew up in the Episcopal tradition, reported as a child he was able to question Biblical scripture to a certain extent, and noted, “I don’t think we were ever encouraged to take the Bible literally in terms of the Levitical codes...so when people would emphasize certain passages over others it was not necessarily the literalism it [was] Biblical selectivism in my mind”. Though he stated, “there have been conflicts between my Christian identity and my sexual identity”, but he noted that growing up in a tradition in which he could question the basis of his beliefs allowed him to negotiate what he knew to be true about himself and his faith in a positive manner.

Two interviewees, Elder, who attended a Southern Baptist Church during his childhood years, and Elise, who attended a Presbyterian Church when she was a child, both noted that they did not ascribe to literal interpretations of the Bible that were professed by their childhood churches. Elder noted that in his teenage years he would go to Sunday School, but as he stated:

I refused to go to preaching services because I got tired of old, fat, white, bald-headed sweaty men yelling at me from the pulpit telling me I was going to hell, at that age they did not know whether I had done anything to go to hell for or not.

Elise stated that she “got in trouble early on for questioning literal interpretations and things” in Sunday school. This questioning process has continued throughout her life, and has allowed her to define her belief system for herself. In remarking about this point she stated, “I seem to be able to set aside the things I don’t believe in or are troublesome”, and she noted finding faith

communities that were loving and accepting of her, no matter where she was on her spiritual journey.

By stating that these interviewees had seemingly less challenging times coming to terms with their sexual and religious identities, I am not promoting the notion that they did not undergo challenges with these two identities along their paths to reconciliation. Rather I am merely highlighting the fact that they found the process to be less arduous than other interviewees. Though for many interviewees reported numerous challenges in integrating their gay or lesbian and Christian identities, and for them questioning literal Biblical interpretations and renegotiating their personal belief systems came later in their faith journeys.

The majority of interviewees reported greater challenges in being able to reconcile their sexual and religious identities than those above. These difficulties occurred because of certain extrinsic factors, such as being exposed to anti-gay theologies, anti-gay interpretations of the Bible, and/or not having messages that affirmed their sexuality as being acceptable in the Christian faith, which caused them a great deal of intrinsic conflict.

Conner, who noted he heard neither affirming nor damning messages about homosexuality growing up in the Methodist Church, acknowledged he felt guilt about his homosexuality because he felt it did not align with his Christian beliefs at the time. He stated, “[I had] a lot of guilt...even though it wasn’t pounded in my head, still the fear that I was going to hell because I was not what God created me to be”. James, who also grew up Methodist, noted he too struggled with his sexuality because he felt “in the broader sense, Christianity and religion frown on or to varying degrees...despise homosexuality”, and noted in middle-school he began to talk with God about his sexuality, though definitely not discussing it with anyone else. For

Conner the road to reconciliation began when he became a congregant of Episcopal Church 1. Though for James the reconciliation process happened because of his developing his own beliefs about his faith, even when he was attending a church that did not necessarily support his sexuality.

Deric, who was active in a Southern Baptist Church prior to becoming a member of Episcopal Church 2, noted that he felt that he could not be honest about his sexual identity in his previous church “even having grown up in it and having been active in it”. He stated, “occasionally some minister would be on some high horse about gays are going to burn”. He even noted that in his previous congregation that a gay man brought his boyfriend to the service, but because of the anti-gay stance of the church the man introduced his significant other as his cousin. Such anti-gay messages, be they overt or not, caused him to question his Christian identity, and really interpret for himself his own beliefs. He later came out to a couple in who had been members in that congregation who encouraged him to find a new church where he could be out, and after meeting his life partner, Don, he began attending Episcopal Church 2.

Both Joseph and Denise, who grew up in African American Christian traditions, described the journey towards reconciling their sexual identities with their Christian identities as being a difficult process. They both felt a great deal of tension between these two identities. Joseph heard vehemently anti-gay messages in his church growing up, and stated he felt fear and trauma as a result of these messages. He stated these messages “tried to browbeat their followers into some sort of submission through fear”. This fear caused him to feel a great deal of internalized homophobia, and feelings of self-loathing caused him to become depressed. He stated, “ I spent most of that part of my life in fear and self-hatred”, which resulted in at least four suicide attempts. With his depression he stated, “came a belief system that this weird thing

inside of me [speaking of his sexual orientation] was something that the devil was putting inside of me to destroy me, to just separate me from God, or to banish or exile me to hell for all eternity". Joseph was also in what he termed a "hellfire and brimstone" Apostolic Church, and he stated, "that out of my pain I would lash out particularly against homosexuals". He would call congregants whom he knew to be homosexual out for prayer in front of the church and "taunt them". This taunting he claimed had a "kind of exorcism feel to it". Denise noted she did not hear any overtly anti-gay messages in her church. Though she felt like she would be doomed to hell for acting on her lesbian feelings because her sexuality was something that was not affirmed by the churches she attended. She also noted that for a long period before she reconciled her sexual and Christian identities she did not feel as though God loved her because of her sexuality. She stated, "even though I had come to grips with who I was intellectually and on many other levels, I still did not know that God loved me"

The process of identity reconciliation for both Denise and Joseph, like many other interviewees, was one that was filled with intense fear of being rejected by God, a fear that was fuelled by anti-gay doctrines and/or Biblical interpretations they had encountered from the time they were children. It took both of them years to even begin to feel that they could acknowledge that their sexuality and their faith no longer had to remain in conflict with one another. The key for both of them in resolving this conflict, as was the case for other interviewees, was to become involved in a Christian faith community that subscribed to pro-gay theologies.

Twelve out of the thirteen interviewees found that going to and/or actively participating in churches with pro-gay theologies allowed them to progress along their journey towards identity reconciliation, and felt because of being involved in these congregations they came to a place of self-acceptance. Interviewees came to these churches for a wide array of reasons, some

actively sought them out because it would allow them to integrate their sexual and religious identities, others came with friends or loved ones and found they enjoyed being in an affirming Christian congregation.

Before he started attending Episcopal Church 1 Conner noted, *“I didn’t know there were places where you could actually say the words ‘I’m gay’, and it was going to be alright...and that’s when the reconciliation started for me”*. He also stated, the reconciliation [process] didn’t really start happening for me until I came to Episcopal Church 1 in ”, and also that “it wasn’t until I came to Episcopal Church 1 in 1989, that I began to feel more comfortable with who I was. For him the love and support from the Church community allowed him to get through the period when he found out he was HIV positive, and helped enable him to come out to his family.

Denise echoed Conner’s feeling in her statement, “[when] I found Unity [I] realized that not every Christian hated gay people, and that God is so much bigger than our theology, and all the denominations, and all the boxes we try to put God in”. Denise noted that she began to experience healing when she started attending Unity Fellowship, and that being in that congregation allowed her to feel that God loved her. Shortly after she began attending the church Joseph, the pastor, asked her to start the process to become an ordained minister. She accepted his offer, and is now the assistant pastor of the congregation. Both Melinda, Denise’s partner, and Joseph felt as though Unity Fellowship has enabled them to live a life in which their sexual and religious identities can be harmony. Melinda noted:

Unity saved my life because, if it had not been for Unity, I don’t know where I would be because I got the full fundamental foundation that God loved me. Not that I had heard negative things, but I was assured and reassured [in the Unity fellowship congregation] if nothing else, God loves you. So, Unity saved my

life. That's all I can say. My parents weren't very tied to the church, so they didn't have this influence, but Unity saved my life.

Many other respondents noted that they liked being involved in their respective congregations because gay and lesbian people are actively involved in all aspects of these churches, and because they do not feel marginalized in these congregations. Elise noted of Episcopal Church 2:

I was particularly impressed when I started going there that a young gay couple was really involved with the youth and acolytes, and it just seemed so healthy...like a real beacon in the middle of society that sometimes likes to equate homosexuality with pedophilia and all that kind of stuff.

All those from Episcopal Church 1 echoed the same feelings expressed by Joachim about their congregation. Joachim's statement:

I found it comforting or reinforcing in that there appeared to be a sizeable number of gay people [referring to both gay men and lesbians] very integrated into the operations of the church, and [that] the church was comfortable with them having a variety of roles, including roles involving kids...

All of the respondents noted that they do not interpret the Bible literally, that they analyzed it in a historical context, and did not find that it challenged their identities as homosexual-Christians any longer. For some of the interviewees the process of interpreting and questioning Biblical scriptures started early on in life, while for others becoming involved in traditions that encouraged this sort of questioning gave them a new understanding of their faith and their spiritual journey. James noted that being involved in Bible study classes at Episcopal Church 1 allowed him to further question and determine what he believed to be true about his faith. He stated, "I just loved the questioning aspect of it, the reasoning, you can ask and probe, and have that environment...you don't have to check your brain out at the door".

The majority of interviewees pointed out that those who propagate anti-gay interpretations of Biblical passages often pick and choose passages and do not use them in context, such as Leviticus 18:22, or do not examine scriptures in a way that is culturally and/or historically relativistic. Denise stated:

You've got to go back and do your own homework, and research and know the history of that chapter or book ...[in order to know] why a pastor [or persons who subscribe to anti-gay theologies] can take that particular passage and try to beat you up with it.

Each interviewee held differing viewpoints about the importance of the Bible in their lives. Denise noted:

my ethics and just the way I walk through the world are Biblically based, which is why I had to reconcile my spirituality with my sexual orientation in order to be well. I couldn't be one of those people that said, well, if the church doesn't get it, to hell with the church".

Denise's viewpoint was contrasted by Elise who stated, "I don't really venerate the Bible...I think the Bible is an amazing and important document...I see it as important, but not literal...and not to be worshipped". Perhaps Catherine sums up the point that gay and lesbian Christians must navigate what they believe to be true about themselves and their faith in order to have a reconciled identity best in her statement, "its like the catacombs, and your going to have to find your own way through it, but it's actually a lot more useful than your Jerry Falwell idea of what it is...would suggest". Jerry Falwell, whom Catherine spoke of, was a fundamentalist Southern Baptist preacher best known for co-founding the Moral Majority in 1979, which vehemently opposes the advancement of equal rights for homosexuals.

Remarks

From the voices of the gay and lesbian Christians above we can begin to understand how family, society, and Christian doctrines, theologies, and practices they have encountered have shaped their journeys towards identity reconciliation. The process of identity reconciliation did not come without its share of challenges for any of the interviewees because they, like other gay and lesbian persons of faith, have had to grapple with both societal and religious stigma that surrounds their sexual identity. They all dealt with the many fears that came with having a sexual identity that put them at odds with the heterosexual norm, of which the fear of being rejected by their families and/or God proved to be emotionally taxing. For each of the interviewees the struggle with self-acceptance took years, and was the source of much stress for them. However, each of these interviewees has come to a place in their lives where they have been able to reconcile their sexual and religious identities to a great extent, which has enabled them to have what many along the journey could not have dreamed was possible, a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity. Paul noted his reconciled identity in his statement, “I don’t really... identify or think of myself as different anymore. I’m just me. I’m who I am”.

Chapter 5

Concluding Statements

This study examines the heart of many issues that can cause identity conflict for gay and lesbian persons of the Christian faith. These issues are grounded in the history of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy that began to emerge in the Middle Ages, which has progressed to support societal and religious ideals that deem the only true, innate, or morally correct form of human sexual expression to be heterosexuality. Gays or lesbians of the Christian faith have various ways in which they deal with these conflicts, which for some includes the reconciliation of their sexual and faith identities. This process is inherently complex, and often involves the renegotiation of societal, familial, and Christian theological and doctrinal ideals. However, based upon interview data those who note having reconciled their two identities report many positive outcomes about being able to that acknowledge their sexuality as something that does not separate them from their faith.

Discrimination explicitly directed towards same-sex attracted persons, both by the Church and in Christian society, began with the invention of the term sodomy in the eleventh century, and its subsequent incorporation into the doctrine of the early Christian Church as a sin. Later with the invention of the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality in the mid-to-late 1800s, the debates between those who felt same-sex attraction was wrong and those who felt it a natural sexual orientation were further polarized. With the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness, which lasted until 1973, homosexuals were further stigmatized by many in society and by the majority of Christian Church denominations. This stigma still exists today to a great extent,

and can be seen in discriminatory laws of our country, as well as being preached in pulpits across the country that label homosexuals to be perverse, mentally disordered, and doomed to hell.

Both anti-gay theologies and pro-gay theologies emerged, as Christian Church denominations began to address issues of sexuality directly in their doctrines, policies, and/or statements. The vast majority of these denominations adopted explicitly anti-gay theologies. Thus, we can begin to understand how the social constructs of what constitute appropriate and or correct forms human sexuality and gender expression, particularly as they pertain to Christianity and to the social norms of the United States, has led to homosexual persons being a group that has by-in-large been religiously and socially othered.

The paradox that is highlighted by this and many other studies is that despite being largely rejected by the Christian Church, many gay and lesbian Christians continue to be active in pursuing their faith. Those who are same-sex attracted often struggle with their sexual identity because it places them outside of social and religious ideals. One such way in which persons deal with their conflicting sexual and religious identities is to reconcile the two, which as documented by Rodriguez and Ouellette, and this study confirms, can be a lengthy process that often involves a variety methods by which people negotiate their two identities before the reconciliation occurs (Rodriguez and Ouellette, 333-347). The voices of those who appear in this text document first-hand the struggles that many same-sex attracted persons must overcome in order to be able to live their lives with a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity.

The interview analysis component of this study is the most crucial part of this research because it provides inside insight into factors gay and lesbian Christian interviewees felt had to be overcome before they were able to reconcile their identities. These interviewees highlight the

often highly emotional and stressful journeys they faced along the road to reconciling their sexual and Christian identities, and the healing that occurred for many of them when they realized these identities did not have to remain in conflict. Interviewees, and no doubt other same-sex attracted Christians, have had to renegotiate truths about themselves and their faith, as well as personal and societal ideals, in order to be able to accept themselves as both homosexual and Christian. Interview analysis confirms that familial, social, and Christian religious norms, specifically as they pertain to sexuality, affected each of these person's journeys towards reconciliation. All but one respondent noted that becoming involved in a Christian Church denomination with a pro-gay theology has been a positive force for them along their faith journey. Certain interviewees noted they felt becoming involved with these denominations served as the catalyst for them to be able to reconcile their two identities. Overall, interview data supports the conclusion that stigma surrounding homosexuality, both socially and in the broader Christian Church, has been a key factor that has promoted feelings of identity incongruity between their sexual and/or Christian identities.

Not only are the voices of interviewees important because they provide qualitative data, which show anti-gay theologies and social stigma have and can hurt many gay and lesbian Christians, but also because they are key in understanding gay and lesbian Christian identities in a deeper personal context. If those who hold anti-gay theological viewpoints would set aside their prejudices and get to know their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the Christian community, they would see that they are no different they are. They would see their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters are trying to live upstanding Christian lives, and those who have families, like James and his partner, are trying to instill Christian values in their children. Though given the vast majority of Christians who attend churches that subscribe to anti-gay theologies,

this process of getting to know and accept their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters is not likely to happen any time soon for the majority of Christians. Rather, it will take time, the diligent work of gay-rights activists and gay and lesbian Christians across the globe, to realize the goal of one day being seen as social and religious equals. Luckily there are Christian denominations with pro-gay theologies that share the grace and love of God, both of which Jesus so freely demonstrated to everyone he encountered in the New Testament, with same-sex attracted individuals. These denominations have brought and continue to bring healing and hope to gay and lesbian Christians, like many of the interviewees. They also provide nourishing faith communities in which gay and lesbian Christians are viewed as valuable Christian equals, as well as allowing homosexual-Christians the freedom to embrace their sexual and religious identities as God-given.

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges that it has numerous limitations. One key limitation is that there were no interviews conducted with gay and lesbian congregants from Christian Church denominations that subscribe to anti-gay theologies, which was the result of various restraints, i.e. the brief time period in which this study had to be concluded, possible complications with human subjects research approval, and the risks involved in outing a member of such a denomination. Thus, the study was unable to document ways in which gay and lesbian persons in such denominations deal with their sexual and religious identities. Because this study was conducted only with respondents who claimed to have reconciled their sexual and religious identities, at least according to the definition of this study, there might be a misconception that achieving a reconciled homosexual-Christian identity is a natural progression in the lives of all gay and lesbian Christians, or that gay or lesbian congregants of churches that subscribe to anti-

gay theologies are inherently blocked from reconciling their two identities. However this study does not wish to promote these ideas. Rather it acknowledges that for its own interviewees the path to reconciliation was part of a progression of their faith journeys, and that many interviewees who attended congregations that promoted anti-theologies found it difficult reconcile their identities while remaining in these congregations.

Future research would be warranted in certain areas that this study does not address. One important area would be to document how gay and lesbian Christians who are congregants of Christian Church denominations that subscribe to anti-gay theologies deal with their sexual and religious identities. Another area future research could address would be to document ways in same-sex attracted Christians whose sexual and religious journeys have not led them to reconciliation cope with their sexuality and their Christian faith.

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Appendix

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics

Name	Race	Sex	Age Category	Congregation
Catherine	Caucasian	Female	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Conner	Caucasian	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Denise	African American	Female	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Deric	Caucasian	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 2
Don	Caucasian	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 2
Elder	Caucasian	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 1
Elise	Caucasian	Female	50-70	Episcopal Church 2
James	Caucasian	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Joachim	Caucasian	Male	30-50	Episcopal Church 1
Joseph	African American	Male	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Melinda	African American	Female	30-50	Unity Fellowship
Paul	Caucasian	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 1
Van	Caucasian	Male	50-70	Episcopal Church 2

