

Spring 2022

Seeking Reconciliation: An Examination of Churches' Response to a History of LGB Discrimination

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**SEEKING RECONCILIATION: AN EXAMINATION OF CHURCHES' RESPONSE TO
A HISTORY OF LGB DISCRIMINATION**

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors from the
South Carolina Honors College

May 2022

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Thesis Summary

History shows us the great pain the church has caused LGBTQ+ people, directly and indirectly. The remnants of this history remain embedded in Christian circles of thought, in both visible and latent forms. As a Christian, some of the strongest pain and hurt I've felt is hearing friends talk about contemplating suicide because of others' response to their coming out, about families rejecting them and cutting them out, feeling unwelcome trying to join church communities because of the stigma, judgment, or avoidance they feel, being told that they're going to hell because they're gay, or getting removed from church leadership positions. I myself have been told that AIDS was God's punishment on gay people, been gifted books encouraging conversion therapy, and heard influential pastors twist statistics and science to paint gay people in an unsavory light. Much of this is fueled by a history of scripture weaponized for political gains.

While these interactions have been outright harmful, there haven't also been many moments when I could tell that the Christians I was around simply were not equipped to interact with concepts regarding the intersection of our faith and the lives of LGBTQ+ people. While they may have been well-meaning, their words and actions were not helpful in fostering a safe or welcoming space for LGBTQ+ people seeking Christian community. As we see in much of politics today, polarization keeps us from entering the liminal space Jesus often frequented, somewhere in the midst of controversy that allows us to see the nuance of this issue. It can be tempting to brush over such a controversial topic, especially in a culture that does not leave much room for mistakes. But I believe that Christians especially are obliged to embrace divisions and transcend them in Christ.

Evangelical Christians believe in objective truth, revealed to us by God. When it comes to such complex topics as homosexuality, it would certainly be much easier to tie things up nicely with a few scriptures or some historical context to affirm one belief or another. But people don't fit into neat little boxes, as much as we'd like them to. More than this, God resists calculation and our foolish attempts to speak for Him out of our own pride.

This study has given me a deeper appreciation for scriptures, for God-breathed sentences that carry great weight. It has reminded me that there are no simple solutions, but the more we unravel our history, the more we can identify ways to move forward and counteract our mistakes.

While my work barely scratches the surface of this topic, I believe it identifies areas where the path to reconciliation can begin. I want this thesis to begin what is hopefully a lifelong pursuit of mine to help my LGBTQ+ friends feel welcome enough in church and community that they can experience the overwhelming love of God that I have gotten the chance to know.

Imagine the spiritual fruits that could come from genuine love and desire for deeper understanding of God's heart on this issue. Imagine the power of weeping alongside our brothers and sisters in their pain, of sitting with them and listening to their experiences, of fostering safe spaces for them to explore God's truth amidst much of the harmful actions committed in His name. Loving each other is the second greatest commandment next to loving God. And we all certainly have room to grow in loving better.

If a good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit, where does that leave us?

Abstract

The Church's response to LGB people has evolved quickly in the past century. Gay visibility and understandings of sexuality as it is known today only began to emerge in the mid-to-late 20th century. Within that time, responses to constantly evolving science and shifting understanding of LGB people invoked a variety of religious and political responses to the issue of legal protections of gay people. Theological interpretations of the Biblical passages surrounding same-sex relations have evolved as the church's response to gay people has shifted from ex-gay therapy, to calls for celibacy or affirming gay marriage. The issues surrounding LGB people within the church are varied and complex. Thus, this thesis analyzed comments from LGBTQ+ people in Columbia, SC about their experiences with the Church. Then local Columbia congregations were surveyed and interviewed to gain an understanding of their response to LGB people. This feedback was analyzed to determine what message LGB people want to convey to the church, and how the church has responded in either positive or harmful ways. Using this feedback, we can begin to examine ways the church can provide a safe space for LGB people to navigate their faith.

Introduction

“My Christian friends had proved to be of no help. My homosexuality was ‘something dreadful’ to them, something they were afraid of, and the only way they knew to handle it was to tell me it would go away if I just trusted God. Nothing I said could convince them otherwise. In this Christians-vs.-gays culture, Christians weren’t such great people to be around if you were gay. They might lecture you, talk down to you, or quote the Bible at you, but they weren’t very likely to make you feel loved. Quite the opposite.”

This passage from Justin Lee’s memoir, *Torn*, exemplifies his struggles as a gay man seeking Christian community. Even his well-intentioned friends were unable to help him on his walk. Arrogance, misconceptions about his same-sex attraction going away, and an inability to deliver scriptural truths with nuanced understanding engendered Lee’s feelings of isolation from Christian community. In place of the love he was seeking, he felt a lack of understanding from his peers.

The responses of Lee’s friends are similar to the experiences many LGB people have had with the Christians in their lives. Many Christians’ language and behavior towards LGB people reflect remnants of a complex political history, which remains embedded in Christian circles of thought.

Sexuality as it is known today is a fairly recent societal construct. Current understandings of it really emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as gay visibility increased during social movements of the 1970’s on. In the midst of social upheaval, conservative Christians sought to reinstate the values they felt most important—including family values, by which they meant conservative political-theological ideas about gender roles and sexual identities. This led to the proliferation of harmful antigay rhetoric by conservative Christian politicians, who used LGB people as a political tool by attributing their very existence as a threat to the social order that Christians should long for. Many claims were backed by faulty science or bigoted perspectives, and yet they seeped into the national consciousness of Christian institutions.

Soon, churches responded by promoting ex-gay therapy, a harmful practice that still finds its way into Christian discourse today. Currently, some churches encourage celibacy for LGB people, while others have moved to be affirming of gay marriage. In the midst of constantly evolving theology and political discourse, many misconceptions have arisen. The resulting treatment of LGB people from these misconceptions can create feelings of unwelcome in Christian spaces and often can be outright harmful.

For this project, I raise several questions to begin unraveling these complex issues in the churches of Columbia, SC. First, what is the message that LGB people would like to communicate to the church? Second, how is the church responding in ways that either mitigate or propagate harmful practices originating in the late 20th century? Third, what are some practical solutions for the church to provide a safe space for LGB people to navigate their faith?

Definition of Terms

LGB

I will use this acronym in my thesis when referring to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Lesbian refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women. Gay refers to a person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Bisexual refers to a person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing primarily on LGB persons, their history, and their experiences within the church.

SSA

Several times, same-sex attracted (SSA) will be used to describe LGB people. This will mostly be used when quoted from interviews with churches, as the term has roots in evangelical Christian circles. Evangelical Christians adopted this term in order to separate attraction to the same sex from the assumed lifestyle and identity that they associate with terms such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Thus, many LGBTQ+ people do not identify with this term.

LGBTQ+

This term refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning people. This initialism and other terms included in the “+” are constantly evolving, but I will be using this term to refer to all sexual and gender minorities. While the experiences of the different identities within this community differ, this term will largely be used with regards to shared experiences of this community, especially when it comes to discrimination and harm from society and the church.

Historical Background

History of Sexuality

In the words of David M. Halperin, “Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production.” (Halperin, 1989). Today, sexuality is defined as the sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviors towards other people. Physical, sexual, and emotional attraction are all aspects of a modern-day conceptualization of sexuality (*Sexuality*, 2019). However, looking back at ancient cultures, the very notion of sexuality as it is defined today is a relatively new concept.

Looking, for example, at classical antiquity, within a culture during which most of the New Testament was crafted, it is difficult to locate an understanding of sexuality in modern terms. The interval of time separating the ancient from the modern world spans vast cultural shifts that challenge current notions of human values, behaviors, and social practices. For one, our current understanding of sexuality is alien to the recorded experiences of ancient peoples. By examining historical sources from classical civilizations, we observe that the cultural fabric of sexual behaviors was radically different than it is today (Halperin, 1989).

For example, in Athens, sex did not express inward dispositions—instead, it was a physical representation of the social hierarchy of the day. The political landscape of Athens featured an immense divide in status between adult male citizens who held virtually all political power, and a subordinate group made up of women, children, foreigners, and slaves. This subordinate group lacked the same rights and privileges granted to male citizens. Sexual activity of the day mirrored this hierarchy; it was not a reciprocal enterprise, but rather an asymmetrical action performed by a social superior on the social inferior (Halperin, 1989).

In this way, sex divided participants into entirely distinct categories: the “penetrator” and “penetrated.” Adult, male citizens could only have legitimate sexual relations with a social or political inferior. This included women, free males who were past puberty but not yet old enough to become citizens, and foreigners or slaves of either sex. Thus, a modern notion of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” was absent from the view of sexual activity. Male indifference to the sex of sexual objects has been documented in ancient Greece and Egypt. According to Halperin, “It never occurred to the ancients to ascribe a person’s sexual tastes to some positive, structural, or constitutive sexual feature of his or her personality” (Halperin, 1989).

Moving forward to modern times, the first conceptions of sexuality as it is recognized today can be observed. In the 19th century, “deviant” sexuality was thought to be symptomatic of a mental disorder, something more episodic (Oosterhuis, 2012). However, around the 1880s, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, neurologist Albert Moll, and other sexologists initiated a shift into a new perspective of “perversions” as more integral and continuous aspects of human beings. Still, they were categorized as pathologic (Oosterhuis, 2012). In fact, in 1923, Merriam Webster’s dictionary had listed the word “heterosexual” as “morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex” (“1923”, n.d.). In short, this characteristic of mental illness coupled with traditional Judaeo-Christian values perpetuated the misguided public opinion on homosexuality throughout the 20th century.

Gay Visibility in the 20th Century and the Emergence of the Culture War

Evangelical Christians and LGB rights activists both began as peripheral movements in the 20th century. At the time, homosexuality was still considered to be pathologic, and the failure of the Prohibition movement of the 1920’s led to a withdrawal of evangelical Christians from objectives to reshape society (Stearns, 2007). However, by the late 1970s, both evangelical Christians and gay rights activists gained more visibility. The National Gay Task Force (now called National LGBTQ Task Force) was founded in 1973 to promote gay rights and acceptance (Gallagher & Bull, 1996). Meanwhile, throughout the 1970-80’s, in response to social upheaval, Christian activists transmuted Biblical issues to larger issues of morality and family. This narrative, surpassing mere theological reasoning, allowed them to capture the attention of secular audiences as well. For example, former beauty queen and born-again Christian Anita Bryant began a campaign to repeal a 1977 gay rights ordinance in Florida (Frank, 2013). She founded an organization called Save Our Children, Inc., basing the campaign on the idea that “homosexuals cannot reproduce themselves, so they must recruit” (Dowland, 2009).

Rev. Jerry Falwell, a Baptist minister from Virginia, founded the Moral Majority in 1979 (Stearns, 2007). Unsettled by the social and sexual upheaval of the past decade, Falwell founded this organization to mobilize conservative Christians as a political force to counteract a perceived decay in the country’s moral values (Stearns, 2007). The Moral Majority espoused the “defense of the family” to combat the rising recognition of feminism, abortion, and homosexuality. Falwell made the fight against gay and lesbian liberation a primary issue, finding it an effective

focus for fundraising appeals. Falwell corroborated Bryant's rhetoric, quoted saying, "Homosexuals do not reproduce! They recruit!" (Falwell, 1981). The Moral Majority rose in popularity by the 1980, gaining several million members and playing an important role in Ronald Reagan's presidential election (*Jerry Falwell*, n.d.). Falwell and the Moral Majority were credited with making American Christian conservatives politically active (*Jerry Falwell*, n.d.).

In line with Bryant and Falwell's harmful discourse, many disreputable scientific studies were promoted to justify claims made by leaders of the religious Right. Psychologist Paul Cameron of the Family Research Institute published many scientific works with the goal of condemning homosexuality. His study, "The Lifespan of Homosexuals," concluded that gay men, on average, have life spans 30 years shorter than those of heterosexuals, while his paper "Child Molestation and Homosexuality" posited that gay people molest children at higher rates (Cameron et al., 1986; Schlatter & Steinback, 2011). While Cameron's work has been rejected by both the American Psychological Association and the American Sociological Association for not being statistically representative, his work still permeates many anti-gay spheres. The Family Research Council, popular news networks, and even state Supreme Court decisions have used Cameron's flawed science to substantiate anti-gay beliefs (*Paul Cameron*, n.d.).

At the same time, the gay rights movement was emerging as a significant force in national politics. Gay visibility increased, challenging the ambivalence towards homosexuality held by previous generations, where many LGB people were still in the closet (Dowland, 2009). However, the Christian Right held the advantage in many ways: with a resume of two thousand years of Christian teachings, significantly larger media presence, and millions of Americans who considered themselves Christians, the force of conservative Christians tended to win out. Thus, even as gay visibility grew, the Christian Right had the advantage of painting the dominant narrative. Whatever they chose to say about homosexuality would permeate popular opinion (Dowland, 2009).

The emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's further fueled anti-gay rhetoric, as it was largely perceived as a gay disease. Some churches issued statements calling for research funding, education, increased pastoral care, or activism. However, churches were by and large silent on the issue. For many religious people, the notion that AIDS was divine retribution on sinful people took hold, especially as those with traditional conservative theology had concluded that homosexuality was a sin that stood under the judgment of God (National Research Council

(NRC, 1993). The epidemic also emerged at the height of the popularity of televangelism, giving a greater platform to moral judgments about high-risk behavior, fear of infection, and overall stigmatization of male same-gender sex. Although such implicit judgments were not universal among religious denominations, and some spoke out for more compassionate responses, few counter voices were heard in the midst of a sweeping conservative political movement fixated on “moral behaviors” (NRC, 1993; Sider, 1988).

Amidst these political tensions, the idea of a “culture war” emerged. The “culture war” signifies a major realignment of worldviews based on values and moral codes, which emerged in the 1960s and remains in the present day (Culture Wars, n.d.). The religious right and the gay rights movements have polarized political identities into uncompromising, morally absolutist sides. Pat Buchanan, a well-known conservative politician, embodied this idea in his speech at the Republican convention in Houston 1988: “There is a culture war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself” (Gallagher & Bull, 1996).

Modern-Day Experience of the LGB Community

Today’s landscape looks much different, and yet the cultural and rhetorical influences of the 20th century remain embedded in the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the church. In the past couple decades, the law has quickly reshaped the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Americans. The Supreme Court’s rulings in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), and *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020) all demonstrate the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, from declaring sodomy laws unconstitutional, to legalizing gay marriage, to protecting LGBTQ+ employees from discrimination (*Bostock*, n.d., *Obergefell*, n.d., *Lawrence*, n.d.). However, this trajectory veers whenever LGBTQ+ rights intersect with another Constitutional right: religious freedom. So long as LGBTQ+ rights do not interfere with religious entities, society and the courts have been quick to advance them. Yet as soon as these two classes came to a head in the famous cases of *Masterpiece Cakeshop* (2018), where a baker refused to bake a cake for a gay wedding, the Court established a narrow ruling to avoid addressing the true conflict (*Masterpiece Cakeshop*, n.d.). The Court’s statement was thoroughly ambiguous, leaving the issue of church and state up to future deliberation and concluding with an avoidant claim that somehow, the future Courts will have the ability to reconcile and uphold both religious

and gay rights. Once more, in July of 2021, the Court denied Certiorari to the case *Arlene's Flowers v. Washington*, a case similar to the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case, but involving wedding flowers (Liptak, 2021). Given the previous advancement of the Court, this sudden stagnation in the legal sphere indicates the continued tension between church and state, with a secular society that increasingly supports gay marriage.

Amidst this political conflict, the LGBTQ+ community has grown in visibility and acceptance in the United States and in many countries around the world over the past two decades (Poushter & Kent, 2020). As support for equal rights for LGBTQ+ people increases, visibility has increased as well (Jones, 2021). Still, there is much ground left to cover before LGBTQ+ people are granted the same protections and liberties as others. More than 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ Americans faced some kind of discrimination in 2020; 1 in 2 report discrimination as having moderate or significant impacts on mental health (*The State*, 2021). LGBTQ+ young adults make up 20-40% of overall homeless young adult population; experience homelessness at younger ages; and remain homeless or unstably housed much longer than heterosexual or cisgender counterparts (Shelton et al., 2018).

Looking beyond the United States, there are even more instances of harming LGBTQ+ persons, once again fueled by religious rhetoric. Uganda passed a bill in 2009 to criminalize homosexuality with a life sentence (originally with the death penalty), a political move fueled by American evangelical influences. While homophobia was already present in Uganda, the arrival of American missionaries with rhetoric of homosexuality destroying families may have fueled the passage of the bill (Gettleman, 2010).

The growth and visibility of the gay community alongside pushback largely orchestrated by the Religious Right has created a marked divide between LGBTQ+ people and the church. Statistics show that LGBT people are significantly less likely to regularly attend religious services or say religion is important in their daily lives (Gallup, 2021). This underrepresentation has a number of causes but is centered in the effects of church policies and doctrine that express disapproval of same-sex relations (Gallup, 2021). LGBTQ+ people often feel that they cannot look to churches or church members for guidance, and they often experience condemnation and rejection from religious institutions (Yates & Snodgrass, 2019).

Responses of the Church

While the concept of homosexuality as a threat to family values was twisted by inflammatory politicians, it is rooted in the traditional Christian value of “gendered order,” a worldview in which the differences between men and women are fundamental markers of human identity determined by God (Dowland, 2009). In the Moral Majority’s Family Manifesto published in 1988, Jerry Falwell writes, “we deny that sexual difference is solely a matter of reproductive biology...sexual differentiation extends to psychological traits which set natural constraints on gender roles... [Family is] the fundamental institution of society, and immutable structure established by our creator” (*Family Manifesto*, n.d.). For better or for worse, the Christian Right’s rhetoric was rooted in these values and shaped concern over the moral decline they saw in America.

Christian scholars have debated the Bible passages concerning homosexuality for decades. While there are a variety of critical approaches, interpretations, and exegesis applied to these biblical passages, two overarching views encompass the discourse: a traditional view, and an affirming view. On both sides, there is much specificity in discourse, and even scholars on the same side of the coin may disagree over certain theological points. This brief discussion will acknowledge overarching themes of each side.

Some themes from the traditional view include gender complementarity established in Genesis between Adam and Eve. This complementarity is evident throughout the Bible, including in the discussion of marriage. Traditionalists believe that this male-female dichotomy is an intentionally-crafted element of marriage, and that any sexual activity outside of this covenant of marriage is sinful. Lastly, traditionalists view passages such as Romans 1:25-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10, which list same-sex sexual relations as sinful, apply to same-sex behaviors in the way they are known today (Sprinkle et al., 2016).

On the contrary, the affirming view sees gender complementarity as a social norm rather than a Biblically-exclusive way of coupling. The affirming view believes that same-sex interactions as mentioned in the Bible are culturally-bound, and that same-sex love as seen today was not culturally recognizable in the times of Biblical authorship. Finally, the affirming view emphasizes the fundamental aspect of covenant when it comes to marriage: a commitment of love and faithfulness that reflects Christ’s love for the church (Sprinkle et al., 2016).

Whatever the church's interpretations of scripture may be, it is important to highlight the development of the church's response and the ways it has impacted the LGB community. An early response was the promotion of ex-gay therapy, the practice of eradicating, or at least controlling, same-sex attractions and same-sex sexual behaviors (Creek & Dunn, 2012). This approach emerged largely in the 1980's, shortly after the APA depathologized homosexuality, whereafter the number of therapists willing to treat it as a mental illness declined (Creek & Dunn, 2012). Exodus International rose to the opportunity, becoming a parent organization for many ex-gay programs that arose within religious communities. Individuals who were uncomfortable with their same-sex desires would seek out or be referred to these programs, which utilized counseling, group sessions, workshops, classes, or conferences in an attempt to eradicate same-sex attractions. Programs had a variety of approaches, balancing between recovery work and theological beliefs of the redeeming power of Christ (Creek & Dunn, 2012).

While attempting to separate themselves from stereotypes of a "gay lifestyle," many people who finished ex-gay therapy introduced many misconceptions in Christian circles. As Justin Lee explained in his memoir, *Torn*, "I could understand [people attending ex-gay groups] didn't want to identify with their former way of life. In their minds, 'gay' encompassed a whole sinful and self-destructive lifestyle. But by giving public testimony that they weren't 'gay' anymore, they were leading millions of Christians to believe that they had become straight, when that wasn't true. And those misleading testimonies were getting a lot of attention on Christian radio, in Christian magazines, and in churches around the world. Part of the problem was that neither these leaders, nor their audiences, were careful to distinguish between sexual *behaviors* and sexual *attractions*" (Lee, 2013).

These testimonies led people to believe that ex-gay therapy could be effective, creating misconceptions among straight Christians who didn't understand the distinction between behaviors and attractions. Into the 21st century, the therapies have been deemed ineffective and contributed to poor mental health outcomes (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Higbee et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association also declared in a 2009 statement that sexual orientation was unlikely to change, and while some individuals stopped acting on their attractions, little science has addressed long-term effectiveness and mental health effects (APA, 2009). In fact, many prominent ex-gay leaders later admitted to still harboring same-sex attraction (Lee, 2013). Still, the ex-gay sentiment remains in conservative Christian circles.

With a decline in acceptance of ex-gay therapy, two new perspectives emerged that remain popular today. The terms “Side A” and “Side B” have become popular phrases to identify the two sides. The terms originated in the 1990s in an internet discussion group called Bridges Across the Divide, a platform for same-sex attracted Christians to discuss their theological viewpoints. The terms caught on within a popular organization, the Gay Christian Network, which sought to provide a space for discourse between LGB Christians with different opinions on faith and sexuality (Lee, 2021). “Side A” refers to Christians who believe that same-sex desire is not inherently sinful, and acting on it is acceptable. They support marriage equality and would align with an affirming theology. “Side B” refers to Christians who believe same-sex desire is not inherently sinful, but acting on it is—thus, they encourage celibacy (Creek, S.J., 2013). They would align with a traditional view of scripture, while still acknowledging their sexuality. While these two opinions have their differences, they diverge from the ex-gay perspective by recognizing same-sex desire. While not all Christians would claim these three labels, they represent a general continuum of Christian ethics surrounding same-sex attraction, from ex-gay to Side A.

These differences in opinion have caused rifts within the LGBTQ+ community. “Side B” same-sex attracted Christians can often feel isolated, “without a real home in the Christian community or in the secular LGBT community” (Urquhart, 2014). Given the general alienation of many LGBTQ+ people from the church, the tension of seeking or recovering one’s faith falls within a polarized environment that often pushes people to choose one side or the other. A general lack of understanding, patience, and room for nuance denies a safe space to explore the complexity of these ostensibly conflicting identities.

Furthermore, denominations are torn between conflicting ideologies. Several Protestant denominations are in the process of splitting over this debate, and the United Methodist Church is expected to vote on a proposal that would split over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ members (Kathryn Post, 2021).

The Church’s response to LGB people has evolved quickly in less than a century. With constant evolution of politics, science, theology, doctrine, and denominations, there is much ground to cover in defining truth above misconception and misinformation to examine how Christians today should respond. These issues, bound in historical and theological conflict, are varied and complex, warranting more discussion than I can offer here. Yet such a complex issue

begs the question: given the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in the world today, challenges to traditional interpretations of scripture, and the often-harmful social forces that LGB people face, how can the body of Christ respond to minimize the harmful effects of political rhetoric from the late 20th century to give people a safe space to navigate their beliefs?

Methodology

Pride Survey

I began by consulting with LoveBoldly, a Christian organization based in Ohio that seeks to “make the church a safer place for LGBTQIA+ people.” LoveBoldly sets up booths at various Pride Festival events to engage with festival attendees. I modeled my Pride data collection off of their Pride setup. I partnered with Washington Street United Methodist Church (WSUMC), a local church who had reserved a spot at the SC Pride Festival, an annual event held in Columbia, SC. I set up two large notepads on stands on either side of our tent. I selected two questions from my consultation with LoveBoldly to display on the top of the note pads:

- I. How did the Christians in your life respond to you coming out?
- II. What is something you wish straight Christians knew?

Question I assessed the responses of Christians to LGB identities. Question II assessed the misconceptions or blind spots that Pride participants had perceived in their interactions with straight Christians.

I provided colored markers for people to use to write their thoughts on the note pads in response to each question. Throughout the day, I engaged people walking by and asked if they would like to share their thoughts on the note pads. If they wished to, we engaged in further conversation about their comments. I took observational notes of the ways in which people interacted with the questions.

Church Survey

Selection of Churches:

I conducted an internet search to locate churches in the Columbia, SC area. I located both LGBTQ+-affirming and non-affirming (traditional) churches and matched them by denomination when possible. The matched churches included the United Methodist Church (UMC), Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and non-denominational. In addition, I chose two African Methodist Episcopal churches, which did not have affirming matches.

Formation of Questions:

Next, I created questions for my church surveys:

- I. What are your church's most important values?
- II. What is your church's official position on LGBTQ+ identities?
- III. Have you communicated this position to your church?
- IV. Have you had any experiences with LGBTQ+ people in your church?
- V. If someone were to come out as LGBTQ+ in your church, how would you respond to them? What resources would you provide?
- VI. Do you have a relationship with any LGBTQ+ groups in the city? Or any initiative within your church surrounding this issue?
- VII. How do you think the church can do better to equip members on how to have dialogue about LGBTQ+ identities?

Methods of Gathering Data: Based on the expressed preferences of the ministry, each church either responded via written responses collected in a Google Survey form, or they engaged in a recorded talk interview.

Response Analysis

To examine the perceptions of LGB people rooted in 20th century political rhetoric, the thematic analysis focused on three central ideas:

- I. What is the message that LGB people want to communicate to the church?
- II. How is the church responding to LGB people in ways that either mitigate or propagate harmful practices originating in the late 20th century?
- III. What are some practical solutions for the church to provide a safe space for LGB people to navigate their faith?

First, I examined the pride responses to determine general thematic groupings of their responses and ways in which Christians may have caused harm to participants. I isolated these phrases and then created thematic codes to group phrases from each question.

Using the thematic concepts derived from the pride responses, I next examined the church responses for ways in which churches either counteracted or perpetuated this rhetoric. I grouped these responses by theme and matched them with the Pride responses.

Results

Initial Impressions

Pride

Question I garnered a total of 39 responses. Question II received 45 responses. Many people appeared hesitant to respond to Question I. At first, only people with positive experiences would respond to Question I. As the pages filled up more, respondents appeared noticeably more comfortable to add their thoughts to the page.

Some people would come up and not even say a word to us, but grab a marker, write something down, and then leave. In this way, we had provided a space for some people to express themselves in ways they couldn't do verbally. Respondents used a lot of biblical terminology, making it clear that many were familiar with Christianity or had grown up with it.

A Christian group harshly preaching against LGBTQ+ identities had set up outside of the Pride festival. One Pride attendant approached us crying after having to pass through the group to enter the festival. A woman from our church gave her a hug and gave her space to decompress. Many more people expressed gratitude that our church was present at Pride. They embraced the space we had created for them to freely express their positive or negative experiences with the church, and many participants engaged in conversations with us inspired by the comments on the posters.

Table I. Pride Question Responses

Question:	I. How did the Christians in your life respond to you coming out?	II. What is something you wish straight Christians knew?
# of Responses:	39	45

Table I. This table displays feedback from Pride questions. Each question is listed, as well as the number of unique responses from Pride participants. Question I received 39 responses, while Question II received 45 responses.

Church Surveys

I received a total of 9 responses (2 from the same church). Of the 14 churches I reached out to, 6/8 affirming churches responded, yet only 2/7 traditional churches responded. Even if they did not fill out the survey, if the church responded via email, I noted any significant verbiage in the thematic analysis.

Table II. Church Survey Respondents

Affirming Churches	Completed Survey?	Traditional Churches	Completed Survey?
Baptist	X	African Methodist Episcopal I	
Episcopal I		African Methodist Episcopal II	
Episcopal II*	X	Baptist	
Lutheran		Lutheran	
Non-denominational	X	Non-denominational	X
Presbyterian	X	Non-denominational	
United Methodist I	XX	Presbyterian	X
United Methodist II**	X		

Table II. This table displays feedback from church surveys. An X indicates that the church completed the survey or participated in an interview. Two X's indicate two responses from different church leadership. A total of 9 responses were gathered. 6/8 affirming churches responded, and 2/7 traditional churches responded.

*This church ended up being not affirming of gay marriage although the denomination in general is. However, the clergyman who responded was himself affirming, so I kept him in this category.

**This church ended up being affirming, when I had originally categorized them as traditional during initial outreach.

Thematic Analysis

Figure I. Poor Theology

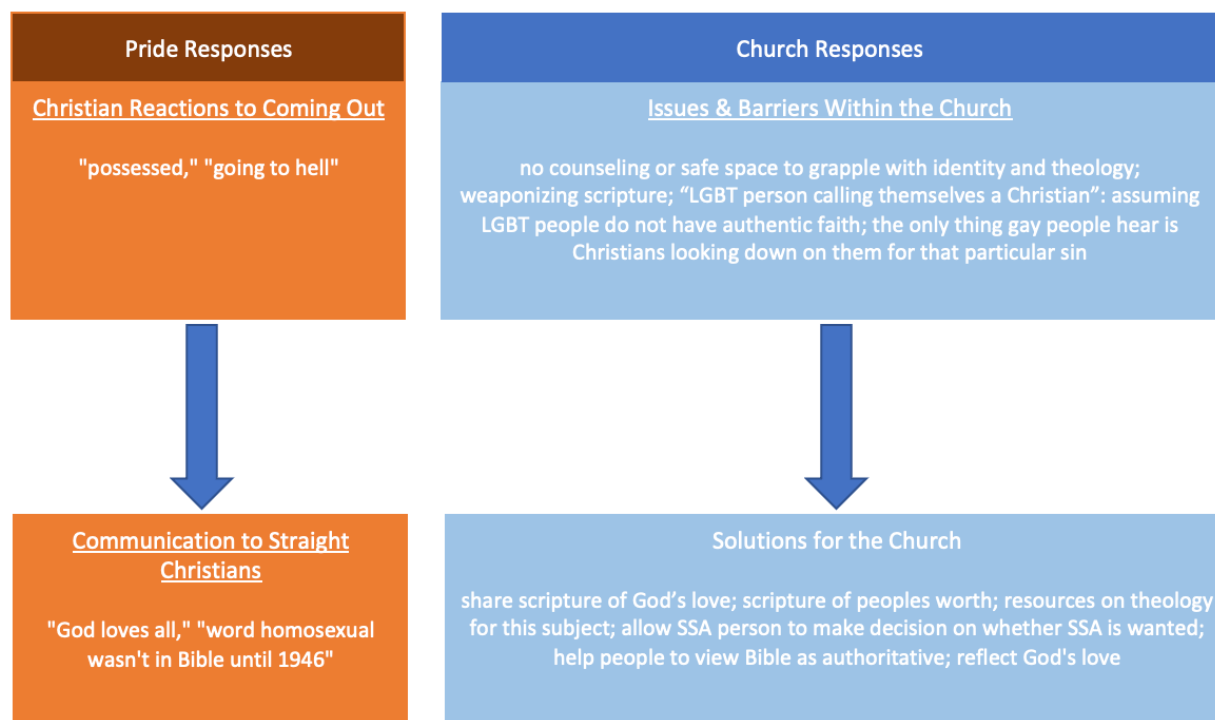


Figure I. This figure displays data from Pride on the left and data from church surveys on the right. Pride responses of Christians' reactions to coming out with poor theology lead to the communication of important themes to straight Christians. Church responses about issues and barriers within the church for LGB people go into positive solutions also mentioned in interviews and surveys.

Figure II. Shunning, Denial, and Division

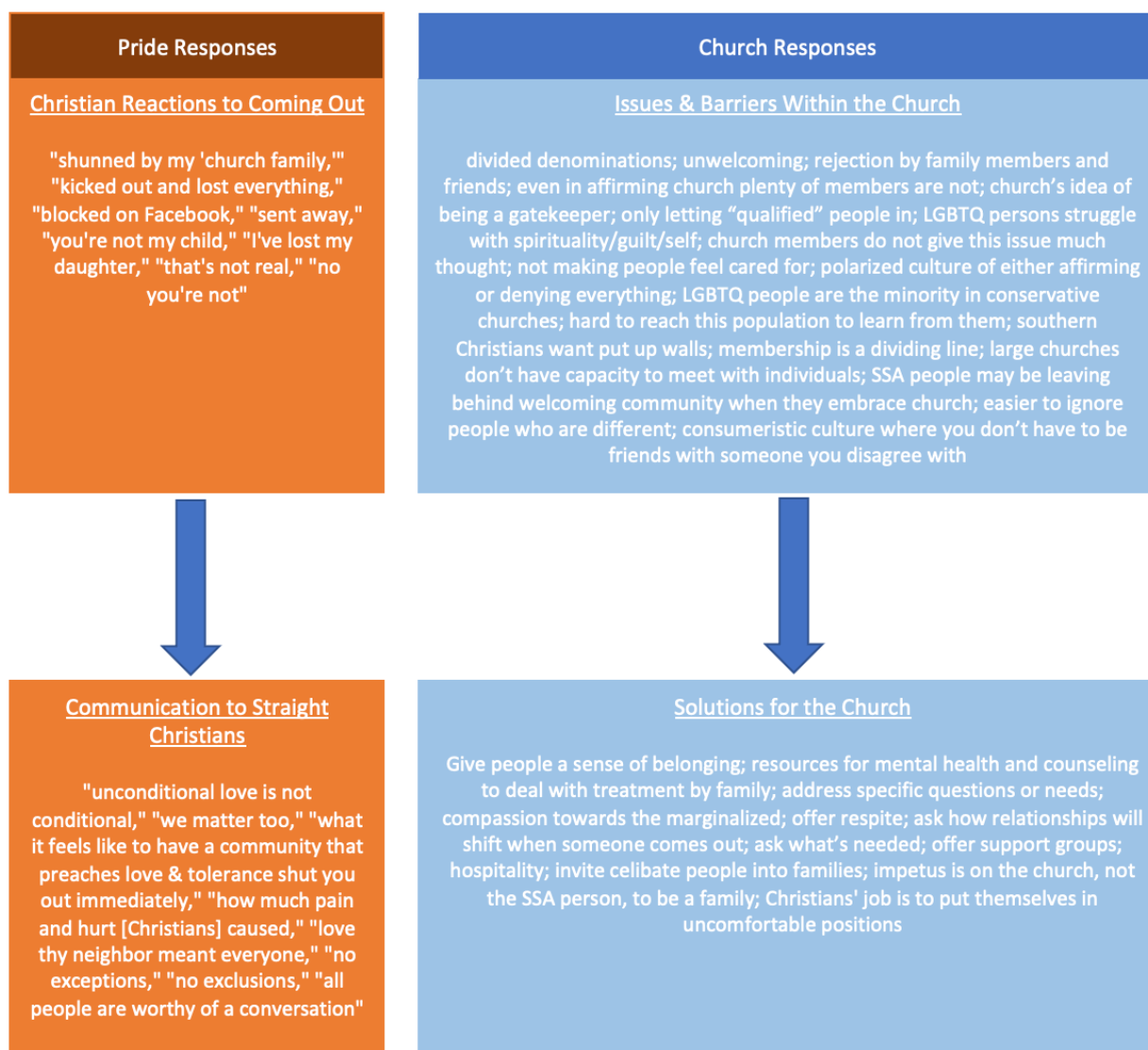


Figure II. This figure displays data from Pride on the left and data from church surveys on the right. Pride responses of Christians' reactions to coming out with shunning, denial, or division lead to the communication of important themes to straight Christians. Church responses about issues and barriers within the church for LGB people go into positive solutions also mentioned in interviews and surveys.

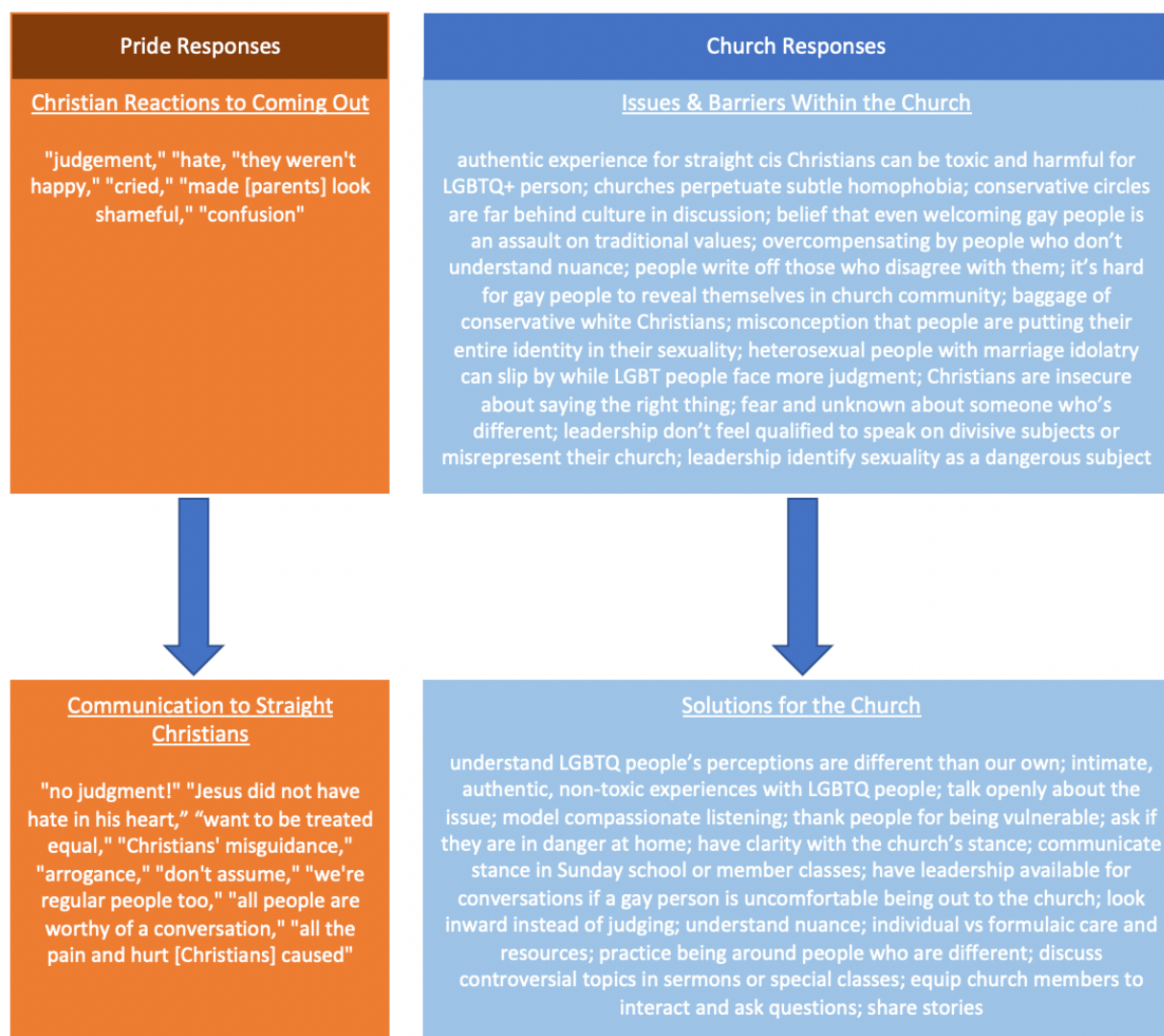
Figure III. Judgment and Misconceptions

Figure III. This figure displays data from Pride on the left and data from church surveys on the right. Pride responses of Christians' reactions to coming out with judgment or misconceptions lead to the communication of important themes to straight Christians. Church responses about issues and barriers within the church for LGB people go into positive solutions also mentioned in interviews and surveys.

Figure IV. Being LGB is a Choice or Changeable

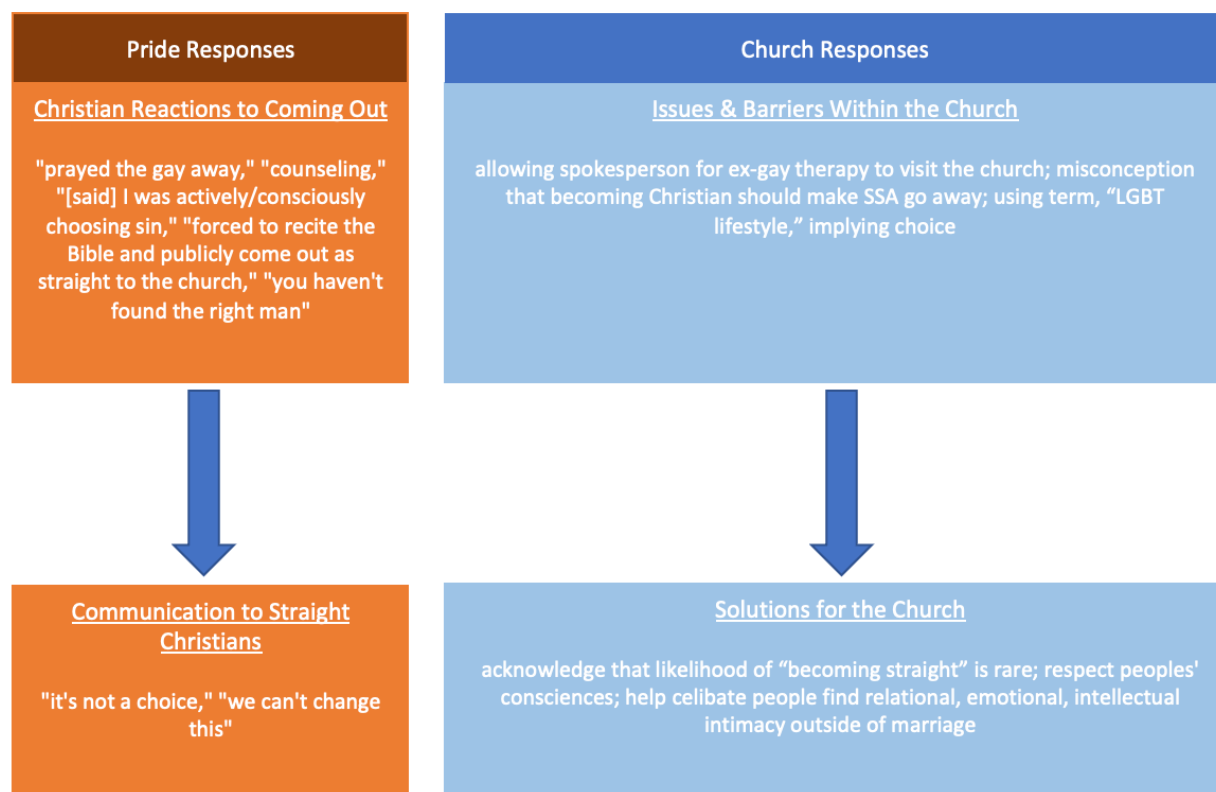


Figure IV. This figure displays data from Pride on the left and data from church surveys on the right. Pride responses of Christians' reactions to coming out with assumptions that being LGB is a choice or changeable lead to the communication of important themes to straight Christians. Church responses about issues and barriers within the church for LGB people go into positive solutions also mentioned in interviews and surveys.

Pride responses fell into four distinct categories: poor theology; shunning, denial, and division; judgment and misconceptions; and belief that being LGB is a choice or changeable.

Christian reactions to Pride participants coming out reflected poor theology in comments such as calling participants "possessed," or immediately responding that they were "going to hell." When asked what they wished straight Christians knew, 40% of Pride responses surrounded the thematic idea of God's love for all people. Furthermore, several comments remarked on the fact that the word "homosexual" was not actually used in the Bible until 1946. This is an important marker of the conflict surrounding proper interpretations of the ancient text.

The interviews with churches mirrored this same thematic content. Negative actions and barriers to LGB people pursuing the community included the lack of safe spaces offered for LGB

people to grapple with scripture and identity. The conservative church, in an attempt to distance themselves from ex-gay inclinations, also did not provide much room to grapple with these issues. Themes of congregants weaponizing scripture against LGB people also came up in feedback from church leaders. Leadership acknowledged that often, the only thing LGB people hear is Christians looking down on them for that particular sin. Finally, the phrase, “LGBT person calling themselves a Christian” also arose, indicating an assumption that LGB people do not have authentic faith.

Positive actions and potential solutions offered by churches included sharing scriptures of God’s love and people’s inherent worth and offering resources in queer theology. Other solutions offered were a challenge to church members to display the love and character of Christ to LGB people.

Pride participants noted that Christians’ reactions to them coming out embodied themes of shunning, excluding, denial, and division. Many people mentioned being shunned by church family, kicked out of their homes, or sent away. Quotes such as “I’ve lost my daughter” and “you’re not my child” emphasize a rejection of individuals because of their sexuality. Denial factored in with comments such as “that’s not real” or “no you’re not.”

Many expressions to straight Christians mirrored the harm caused by this exclusion and denial. Comments such as wanting Christians to know “what it feels like to have a community that preaches love and tolerance shut you out immediately,” and “how much pain and hurt Christians caused.” People emphasized the need for unconditional love and acceptance, and that “all people are worthy of a conversation.”

This same division and exclusion was noted by church leadership. It has also expanded to divisions within church such as denominations splitting on theological grounds. Feelings of divisive or unwelcoming presences in church were noted. Many pastors noted the conservative church’s idea of being a “gatekeeper,” only letting “qualified” people in. One church noted that membership was reserved for repentant same-sex attracted people only. Another pastor noted that LGBTQ+ people are a minority in conservative church spaces, adding to their feeling of being unwelcome. This compounded with the comment that “SSA people may be leaving behind a welcoming community when they embrace the church,” indicating a shortcoming of the church’s ability to provide that same welcome. As noted, “southern Christians want to put up walls and shout the truth over them.” This culminated in themes of polarization which mirror

today's political climate. People believe they have to “either affirm or deny everything.” Pastors also noted that it is easier to ignore people who are different.

Positive actions and potential solutions offered by churches included giving people a sense of belonging, being compassionate towards the marginalized, and offering respite. Many pastors emphasized resources for mental health and counseling. They also emphasized asking questions, such as what is needed and whether people's relationships will shift when they come out. Churches also offered support groups. Traditional churches emphasized the need for congregants to not withdraw, and to put themselves in new and uncomfortable positions. They emphasized, “the impetus is on the church, not the SSA person, to be a family.” One church invites celibate people into families as an “adoptive third parent,” or offers community on family vacations and weekly dinners.

Judgment and misconceptions were a commonly observed theme within the Pride feedback. Words such as “judgment,” “hate,” “shameful,” and “confusion” emphasize this theme. In response to straight Christians, Pride participants emphasized the need to recognize judgment, arrogance, and misguidance. They simply “want to be treated equal,” and want Christians to know “all the pain and hurt” they have caused. Pride participants emphasized that “Jesus did not have hate in His heart.”

Church interviews acknowledged that churches can perpetuate subtle homophobia. Leadership acknowledged that white, conservative Christians carry some baggage, and that conservative circles tend to “always be three steps behind where culture is” in terms of discussion. Some people in the church believed that LGB people being in church was an “assault on traditional family values.” Pastors believed that judgmental attitudes may arise from “overcompensating by people who don't grasp nuance.” Christians may be insecure about saying the right thing, or there can be “fear and unknown” about someone who is different. Even some leadership who declined to participate noted that they “don't feel qualified to speak on divisive subjects.” Barriers to addressing this issue included people writing off those who present an idea they don't agree with, making it difficult to share information. This judgment makes LGB visibility even less likely, as “it's hard for gay people to reveal themselves in church community or be known for that.”

Church leadership emphasized that it's important to remember that LGBTQ+ people's perceptions are different from our own. Thus, it is important to have “intimate,” “authentic,”

“non-toxic” experiences with LGBTQ+ people. It is important to talk openly, model compassionate listening, and thank people for their vulnerability. Affirming and traditional churches alike emphasized the need for clarity on a church’s stance, via member classes, Sunday school classes, or sermons. Conservative leaders did not want to “dupe” or “mislead” potential members about their theology. Leaders emphasized the importance of directly confronting homophobia and having someone leadership who are safe to come to if someone experiences homophobia. Because of hesitancy on being open about sexuality to the church, having safe private conversations with leadership is an important start. It is important to provide individual, rather than formulaic care to those who need it. Leadership emphasized the need for more venues to equip church members on how to interact with those who they disagree with and ask questions. Lastly, they emphasized the importance of sharing stories.

Finally, themes emerged that Christians perpetuate the belief that LGB people can become straight, and/or it is a choice. Christian’s’ responses to Pride participants coming out included being sent to counseling, “praying the gay away,” being told that they were “actively and consciously choosing sin,” or that they “just haven’t found the right man yet.” One participant even shared that they were “forced to recite the Bible and publicly come out as straight to the church.” In response to this, Pride participants noted that they wanted straight Christians to understand that “it’s not a choice” and “we can’t change this.”

The church leadership shared other examples of this sentiment present in their churches. One church had allowed a prominent ex-gay spokesperson to visit their church, which had admittedly made LGB congregants feel unwelcome. Leaders also mentioned questions that had been posed by congregants, such that they had thought becoming Christian should make same-sex desires go away. One leader referred to an “LGBT lifestyle,” a commonly used phrase that implies it is a choice.

Solutions posed by churches included giving people space and respecting their conscience. Leaders also acknowledged that the likelihood of “becoming straight” is incredibly rare and should be made known to avoid misconception. Finally, traditional churches emphasized a need to provide relational, emotional, and intellectual intimacy outside of marriage in response to the idea that these attractions do not change.

Discussion

Poor Theology

Comments from Christians to Pride participants such as “possessed” and “going to hell” indicate quick reactions that attribute God’s retribution or demonic forces. When people who have confided their sexuality to Christians in their life hear responses like this, their idea of Christian love is skewed. When asked what they wished straight Christians knew, 40% of Pride participants’ comments encompassed the theme of God’s love for all people. This indicates a dissonance many LGBTQ+ people have felt between perceived loving nature of God and the actual treatment they have received from Christians and faith communities.

The interviews with church leaders mirrored this disconnect, revealing a lack of safe spaces in the church for people to be open about their sexuality. Leadership acknowledged how scripture has been weaponized by church members against LGB people and how often LGB people only hear Christians looking down on them for one particular sin. Once again, the idea of Christian love is skewed as some churches are unable to align scriptural realities of God’s love and people’s inherent worth with their LGB visitors.

Furthermore, the lack of safe space makes it difficult for people to not only be open about their sexuality, but also grapple with it in light of scriptural truths. Several Pride comments remarked on the 1946 inclusion of the word “homosexual” in the Bible. Much theological debate has surrounded Biblical passages such as 1 Timothy 1:9-10, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, which use a certain Greek word for some form of male-male sexual interaction. Using a different lenses of exegesis surrounding the cultural context of these passages, scholars uphold different ideas of sexual ethics. While traditional Christians often argue that this wordage is validly translated as “homosexual” and invokes same-sex interactions as seen today as much as back when it was written, many people believe the verses around same-sex sexual activity are culturally bound in that time, and the Greek word carries a specific meaning. This mirrors the pervasive conflict surrounding the authority of the Bible, conflicting biblical scholarship, and the lived experiences of LGB people attempting to navigate this debate, which often embodies harm.

When scholarship is divided over interpretations of Biblical passages, and without the guidance of welcoming, loving church leadership, it may be difficult for people to grapple with a divisive topic outside of Christian community. Whether the church wants to distance itself from

an ex-gay image, or veers too far in the other direction by misusing scripture to support bigotry, there are many ways churches create barriers to grappling with scripture and identity.

The idea of Christian love surfaced significant amount among Pride participants—with 40% of comments revolving around God’s love, there is a clear expression of the dissonance Pride participants felt between the treatment they’ve received from Christians and what they perceive as God’s loving nature. While many Christians may believe that “tough love” and focusing on God’s law over the needs of the individual are indeed how Christ’s love should be shown, I posit that as Christians, our job is to embody God’s love in a way that demonstrates His care for each human being—we should be conduits of His love here on earth. Practically, that can mean turning to the scriptures to recognize the magnitude of the importance of us all being made in His image. Rather than viewing people as broken projects, the impetus should be on Christians to get to know people inside and out and serve their needs, as God has done for us. Until this way of displaying Christ’s love is embraced, why should anyone expect an LGBTQ+ person to seek Christ? How are they to understand His love for them and His deep knowledge of each individual if we are not striving to embody it ourselves? More on this throughout the discussion.

Shunning, Denial, & Division

Perhaps some of the most outright harmful responses of Christians included their shunning, exclusion, and rejection of Pride participants. Division at all levels of the church has emerged from these attitudes. Family members’ emotional words and actions such as kicking people out of their homes or rejecting their children, show great psychological harm caused to those who trust them as family.

Pride comments such as “what it feels like to have a community that preaches love and tolerance shut you out immediately” carry a lot of weight in light of these Christians’ responses. The expressions of Pride participants indicate a desire for empathy and accountability by the church to recognize “how much pain and hurt they caused.” Responses indicated a desire for unconditional love and acceptance, mirroring Christ’s love. Many Pride participants appeared to be aware of the values Jesus Christ embodies, such as love. Participants were able to identify that this was missing from their lived experiences in Christian spaces, and expressed a desire to have these needs of empathy, repentance, and love be met.

Interviews with churches demonstrated how faith communities can be complicit in or perpetuate harm caused to LGBTQ+ people. While the churches who did respond were adamant on the need for clarity on the church's scriptural view of same-sex attraction, the overall proportion of respondents indicate that is not a commonly-held value. Many churches who declined to participate embodied an avoidance of the issue, some even referring to it as a "dangerous subject." Others simply did not respond, or sent along their own vague resources in place of direct dialogue on the topic. Churches were unwilling to be honest about their stance and thus contribute to ambiguity. This unwillingness to engage in the topic may also indicate an unwillingness to engage with LGB people themselves.

When an organization that many people look to for guidance on living their lives is silent on such a relevant issue, it leaves room for other assumptions, homophobic actions, and "othering" of LGB people to accumulate. Even providing a baseline statement on their theological stance is not widely conducted among churches. Even if this is addressed, norms of making LGB people feel unqualified, unwelcome, or unable to have full membership in a church, leave little question as to why LGB people have expressed hurt and exclusion from churches or Christians in their lives. As the Pride participants made clear, avoidance on the structural level of the church likely carries into avoidant, exclusive actions by individual Christians as they interact with LGB people in their families or lives. Without communication, divisions begin to occur and our world continues to polarize.

This brings us back to the question of what Christian love should look like. Pride participants expressed a desire for empathy, accountability, and the kind of acceptance Christ offers. How should it look for Christians to fill these needs for LGBTQ+ people? First and foremost, it looks like Christians taking the first step to even acknowledge the reality of LGBTQ+ peoples' experiences in the church. Avoidance and shunning only work to dig a bigger chasm between the LGBTQ+ community and the Christian faith. Churches must face this issue head-on, especially in a society where visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people has increased. There is no room for avoidance and ignorance. Jesus did not flee from hard questions; He grappled with them in light of what He knew and communicated with people who approached Him.

Empathy looks like stopping to listen and validate the stories and experiences LGBTQ+ people have to share, whether it is about their life in general, or their particular experiences with

the church. It looks like feeling the hurt and pain they have felt, just as Jesus took on human form and with it the emotional burden of the human experience. He did not shy away from difficulty or pain, but faced it head on and wept with those who wept. Accountability is the next step—it involves self-examination, looking at how one’s actions and the actions of the establishment they are a part of have directly or indirectly harmed others, and owning up to their mistakes. Confession and repentance of a wrongdoing are key tenets of the Christian faith. Finally, the kind of acceptance Christ offers goes back to the idea of seeing all people as made in God’s image and worthy of our time, care, and attention—beyond the one piece of their identity that so many latch onto. True acceptance into faith communities looks like holding that empathy and repentance so that LGBTQ+ people may see that Christians hold genuine care for their experiences and want to know them for who they are, rather than fixating on one part of their complex selves.

Judgment & Misconception

Pride participants noted many harmful reactions from Christians in their lives including judgment, hate, shame, and confusion. Once again, the mention that “Jesus did not have hate in his heart” emphasizes how Pride participants are aware of the scriptural portrait of Jesus’s love and yet do not experience it in their interactions with Christians.

When there is silence, avoidance, or not enough conversation on a topic within the church, misconceptions are able to fester. Church leadership acknowledged how unchecked homophobia can “metastasize” in corridors of the church. Especially in conservative circles who are always far behind where culture is, congregants may even think that “welcoming gay people is an assault on traditional family values.” This quote, mentioned by a pastor of a traditional church, makes it clear that many congregants still hold onto the political rhetoric around LGB people that emerged with Jerry Falwell in the 1970’s.

Pastors in interviews also discussed other reasons why people in churches may be unwelcoming to LGB people. Some may not understand nuance and be overcompensating, some just choose to write people off if they don’t agree, harkening to the age of social media and political polarization; some fall under the misconception that LGB person’s sexuality is their entire identity, rather than just a part of their complex self; some Christians are insecure about saying the wrong thing; some are fearful of the unknown or someone who is different; or church

leadership themselves don't feel qualified to speak on divisive subjects or potentially misrepresent their church. All of these reasons are valid, as people growing up in Christian spheres are likely to be insulated from direct experiences with LGB people, and are likely to hear Christian rhetoric on the topic without engaging with the complex scholarship on the issue or the people themselves. Without clarity from church leadership, misconceptions that carry "judgment," "arrogance" "shame," and "confusion" will continue to circulate and leave church communities as an uncertain environment for an LGB person to navigate.

Being LGB is a Choice or Can Be Changed

While ex-gay ministries have fallen away from the prominence they held in the 20th century, the remnants of the idea that LGB people either choose their sexuality, or can become straight, still remains within church culture. "Praying the gay away" or saying that LGB people "consciously choose sin" by admitting their sexuality can be damaging responses. One Pride respondent even discussed that they were "forced to recite the Bible and publicly come out as straight to the church." This toxic method of placing the person in front of a congregation and having them renounce a part of themselves undermines their human dignity and ignores the reality that sexual orientation is not usually a matter of preference or choice.

Church leadership mentioned how they get questions from members wondering why being "saved" does not mean a person will "become straight." These misconceptions are rooted in the ambiguous dialogue and misleading stories upheld by church leadership. While there are breakthrough stories about LGB people becoming Christian and becoming straight, it can be unhealthy to prop up such stories that LGB people with "strong enough" faith can become straight. Churches who continue to welcome ex-gay speakers will not only perpetuate ideas of changeable or chosen sexuality to straight members, but it will also send a message to many LGB visitors that they are unwelcome as they are. Thus, interviews with pastors in traditional churches who still made sure to emphasize the incredibly small likelihood of "becoming straight" were vital. This information must be made clear to congregations to dispel misconceptions.

Finally, wording can be incredibly important. Phrases such as "LGBT lifestyle" were used by church leadership in interviews. This phrase in particular has roots in stereotyping LGB activities and equivocating being LGB with the choice to live a certain "lifestyle," even though

the lives of LGB people vary as much as straight people. Phrases like this perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes about LGB people and their lives.

Takeaways

Pride feedback and church interviews provided much insightful content. From the different thematic responses, three important ideas emerged for where churches can begin the work of undoing past harm and striving to provide a safe space for LGB people to navigate their faith.

1. Provide clarity on church's stance

The number of churches that refused to participate or offered harmful comments such as calling this a “dangerous topic” makes it clear that on a very basic level, better communication in the church about the institution’s theological stance is necessary. Ambiguity and avoidance lead to the perpetuation of misconceptions and corridors of homophobia to remain. They can also mislead LGBTQ+ visitors into thinking the church believes something it does not.

2. Eliminate common misconceptions and take accountability

The majority of responses made it clear that many misconceptions remain, from belief that being LGB is easily changeable or a choice, to harmful stereotypes of a “gay lifestyle,” to convictions that LGB folks are a threat to “traditional family values.” While misconceptions and stereotypes remain, many people miss the opportunity to observe the innate dignity of all human beings who are made in the image of God. It is essential that churches communicate factual information about what it means to be LGB and address the common stereotypes and misconceptions that circulate in Christian circles. While this task may be daunting to talk about in many church communities, the impetus should be on the church to undo the decades of harm it has caused to LGB people by beginning to correct past mistakes and harmful false rhetoric.

3. Take Accountability

Pride participants emphasized their desire for Christians to truly understand all the pain and hurt they have caused. In order to truly take ownership of eliminating misconceptions and engaging with LGBTQ+ visitors, church leadership and membership, must acknowledge how

their individual actions and the actions of the establishment have have directly or indirectly harmed others. Repentance is a central principle of the Christian faith. It goes beyond an apology and centers around reforming one's mindset and actions to avoid repeating wrongdoing.

4. Equip members to engage and communicate well

As our world continues to become more polarized, the skill of having a conversation with someone who disagrees with you has become more valuable. Many Pride responses emphasized inflammatory emotional reactions by Christians towards LGBTQ+ people in their lives. Church leadership also noted that today's climate includes people who shut down or ignore someone who offers them ideas they disagree with. Thus, offering education on how to engage with others and what questions are appropriate to ask is an important step. Furthermore, offering specific education on LGBTQ+ identities can help minimize fear of "saying the wrong thing." Additionally, sharing stories can help illuminate the issue beyond an abstruse theological debate to an issue that directly impacts fellow human beings.

Engaging and communicating well is the impetus for Christian love. As we have dialogue with those who are different than us, we recognize their humanity and even grow in empathy. We begin to understand how their loved experiences have made them into who they are. We begin to see God's hand has uniquely touched their lives. And as we hear their stories, we grow more desirous to engage in steps 1, 2, and 3 to remove stumbling blocks in their faith journeys.

What Christian Love IS and IS NOT

*First, what **isn't** Christian love?*

Kicking people out of homes or churches, shunning, or lack of dialogue in the name of "tough love" is not Christian love. If a certain theology stipulates that acting on or even being LGB is sinful, no one is justified in ignoring, avoiding, or cutting out people who identify as such. On a most fundamental level, this denies how God has shown love to us. Never once has He waited for us to be perfect and free of sin before we are welcomed into His kingdom.

*Now, what **is** it in the context of loving LGBTQ+ folks?*

Christian love involves meeting people exactly where they are and loving them where they are. Truly desiring to know the whole person begins with listening, which leads to empathy.

Empathy leads to a desire to learn about individual and structural means of harm, which leads to repenting and adjusting actions to in order to cease contributing to that harm and to actively address it where it arises.

A Note for “TQIA+” Folks

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge that for the purposes of this thesis, I largely focused on LGB folks. While I acknowledge the incredible barriers and harm that other gender and sexual minorities face in the church, I believe that these groups warrant their own historical and theological discussion, which I regret I did not have the space to cover in this thesis to the length it deserves.

Furthermore, feedback has indicated that many churches have not gotten around to the discussion of transgender people or other sexual and gender minorities to the extent that they have for LGB people. One interview with a traditional church revealed, “This is an issue where probably the “LGB” portion of it has been more talked about, because in conservative circles, that is a wave that we’ve been talking about for probably 10 or 15 years. We always seem to be at least a half step, if not 3 steps behind where culture is... I think the “T” issue, and anything more progressive than that, I think there’s a lot of, kind of vitriol and pushback right now.”

This statement makes it clear that there is still much left open for discussion in the Christian community. While this work was not focused on “TQIA+” people, I hope that my suggested takeaways from this thesis for creating spaces of encounter, inclusion, and conversation can open up spaces for discussion of other sexual and gender identities beyond the “LGB.”

While I do not have the same level of feedback to support it, I do believe that the same three fundamental steps for the church can apply to others in the LGBTQ+ community. Clarity, communication, and equipping for conversation can certainly apply when addressing any groups of people who have been marginalized from the church. Clarity will probably be most essential at this point, as the “vitriol” and “pushback” involved with the discussion of gender and sexual minorities continues. Having fruitful discussion that leads to theological consensus will be necessary before churches can properly communicate and equip their members to engage and welcome all people made in God’s image.

Conclusion

Through this thesis, I have become richer in Christ. He has broken down my own preconceived notions, my blind spots, my ignorance, my need to have the “correct” theology. He has reminded me that people are complex and in need of love right where they are. He has renewed the message of the gospel to me in the ways Jesus has truly freed us from the law, and the ways He loves us more than I can possibly fathom. I certainly hope that the feedback I received from this small community of Columbia, SC will resonate with others who have been grappling with this issue and searching for a concrete place to begin.

Thematic responses from pride participants that were mirrored in the church survey included poor theology; shunning, denial, and division; judgments and misconceptions; and belief that being LGB is a choice. Poor theology included forgetting the innate dignity of all human beings being made in the image of God, and choosing condemnation over love. Shunning, denial, and division included rejecting or excluding LGB people from churches (and family and community), denying the reality of being LGB, and creating polarized church environments in which people are afraid to interact with this issue. Judgment and misconception included stereotypes and misunderstandings about what it means to be LGB. Lastly, it was clear that many churches and Christians believe that being LGB is a choice, or it can easily be changed if someone’s faith is strong enough.

Overall, the feedback gathered makes it clear that there are many areas of misunderstanding and poor response both on an individual and organizational level, which hinder LGB people from accessing church community and pursuing their own faith. While it can be easy to overlook the obvious, sometimes it is just that which we need to be reminded of. In the midst of theological debate and political polarization, the most important and essential step we can take is to initiate dialogue, which comes in many forms. A good starting point for churches would be to provide clarity on their theological stance, educate the congregation to eliminate stereotypes and misconceptions about LGB people, take accountability for past and current harm, and equip the congregation to engage and communicate with people who are different from them.

While this issue is complex and each church has its own strengths and weaknesses (as well as its own theological specificities and pastoral histories), these actions can help improve overall clarity and communication within the church in order to tackle other issues that arise. As

the knowledge and response to this issue continues to evolve in political and religious spheres, the development and maintenance of these lines of communication and clarity will remain essential to address any future questions that arise and invite LGBTQ+ people to participate in the discussion.

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