

Open Doors: Understanding LGBTQ-Affirming Perspectives in Church Leadership

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ Americans experience an internal conflict with Christianity at a greater rate than their heterosexual counterparts (Pew Research Center, 2013). Previous research has found that religious acceptance of LGBTQ people may increase the well-being of LGBTQ people (Miller, Watson, Eisenberga, 2020). Little research has been conducted relating to the viewpoints of LGBTQ-affirming church clergy. Knowing their viewpoints will provide a first-hand perspective on the impact of LGBTQ acceptance in the church. This can be used to inform the public on how to best support LGBTQ people. In this qualitative phenomenological research study, 6 clergy members from various LGBTQ-affirming churches were interviewed regarding their personal viewpoints and experiences, as well as their church's ways of supporting LGBTQ people. 5 key themes were identified in their answers: demographic factors, religious experiences, religious beliefs, LGBTQ experiences, and childhood role models. After reviewing main findings, societal implications are discussed, with an emphasis on applying the research to creating more tolerant religious spaces.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing concern for the general well-being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth and adults due to deeply-rooted societal prejudices. Research indicates that LGBTQ individuals are more likely to report decreased life satisfaction compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Pachankis, Bränström, 2018). Religious ideologies have historically been used to justify cases of homophobia, sexism, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice (Lee, Ostergard Jr., 2017). While many turn to religion for support during difficult times, research shows that almost one-third of LGBTQ individuals report feeling unwelcome in a place of worship (Pew Research Center, 2013). Consequently, many LGBTQ individuals feel that the Christian church is an unwelcoming place for them, leading them to avoid affiliating with religious spaces altogether. The Pew Research Center (2013) confirms that LGBTQ individuals are less likely to report a personal connection to spirituality and religion. However, research indicates that Christian congregations that are welcoming to sexual minorities see a rise in members who identify as LGBTQ (Masci, 2014). This has led to a growing interest in how church clergy view the issue of queerphobia in religious spaces, what they do to mitigate the issue, and how to lead LGBTQ people to the church. There is a gap in the literature regarding LGBTQ experiences in the church, particularly from the perspective of church clergy themselves. Through understanding such experiences, Christian churches can revise their worship practices and doctrine to include sexual minorities. In turn, this can lead to a rise in LGBTQ participation. This research paper aims to discuss how LGBTQ-affirming church clergy view LGBTQ acceptance in religious spaces, the strategies they use to communicate their own views, and how others can learn from their experiences to create more inclusive churches. Exploring the perceptions and experiences of church leaders will offer a firsthand perspective into these issues. Through understanding these experiences, non-affirming churches can learn about the importance of redefining religion as an accepting outlet for anyone seeking spiritual guidance and support.

Methodology

Aim

The current study investigates and discusses the perspectives of church clergy who are affirming towards LGBTQ individuals, which could provide valuable insight to Christian churches who seek to enhance inclusivity toward sexual minorities.

Research Design

This study was a qualitative phenomenological research study utilizing audio-recorded structured interviews.

Consent and Ethical Issues

All ethical considerations were followed for the current study. Informed consent was taken for data collection. Confidentiality and privacy of the respondents were maintained; no data was disclosed to a third party. No identifiers such as name or pictures are disclosed in the article or recorded while conducting the study. Participants were identified by numbers (i.e. Participant #1, Participant #2, etc.). Any physical research documents and materials were double-locked in a safe within a room. Digital research documents were password-protected on a password-protected computer. The study was IRB-approved and ethical guidelines of research were followed.

Sample

Participants for this study were purposefully selected to include church clergy from LGBTQ affirming spaces. A total of six participants (three assigned female at birth and three assigned male at birth) were included. The participants' ages ranged from 50 to 65 years, with an average age of 59.2 years (SD 5.15). All participants currently reside in California. Five participants identified as white, while one participant identified as African-American. The religious backgrounds represented in the sample included Protestant (n=4), Episcopalian (1), and Swedenborgian (1). Three participants reported earning \$100,000 or more in annual income, two participants reported earning \$75,999 - 99,999, and one participant declined to answer. Participants reported their academic background, with 5 participants receiving a Master's Degree and 1 participant receiving a PhD or higher. Participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. To ensure anonymity, participants are identified using numbers rather than individual names. These include Participant #1, Participant #2, Participant #3, Participant #4, Participant #5, and Participant #6.

Table 1 - Participant Demographics (N = 6)	
Characteristics	n (%) or M (SD)
Age	59.2 (5.15)
Gender	
Male	3 (50)
Female	3 (50)
Race/Ethnicity	

White	5 (83.33)
African-American	1 (16.67)
Highest Level of Education	
Master's Degree	5 (83.33)
PhD or higher	1 (16.67)
Household Income	
\$75,999-99,999	2 (33.33)
\$100,000 or higher	3 (50)
Prefer Not to Say	1 (16.67)
Religious Affiliation	
Protestant	4 (66.66)
Episcopalian	1 (16.67)
Swedenborgian	1 (16.67)

Scales used/tools used/instruments used

Interviewees were contacted via email, interviewed through Zoom, and recorded with an EVIDA digital voice recorder. Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes. When not being used for interview recording and transcription, the recording device was locked in a safe to avoid security breach.

The questionnaire was author-developed and consisted of 12 questions:

1. Who were your role models growing up and what did they think LGBTQ people?
2. When it comes to prayer requests, what do you think LGBTQ people pray about?
3. What message do you think it sends out having an openly-gay clergy member and what impact do you think this would have on an LGBTQ person who sees it?
4. How does your church view LGBTQ people and how does this affect the content of worship and sermons?
5. What message does your church try to send out to LGBTQ people and why?
6. Non-white LGBTQ adults are more likely to say that there is a conflict between their religion and their sexual orientation. Why do you think that is?
7. A 2022 survey of over 10,000 US adults found that 41% of people who say that gender is specifically assigned at birth point to religion as a factor in their reasoning. What role do you think religion plays in gender identity?
8. What do you think is the biggest reason LGBTQ people are increasingly less religious?
9. How can religion help an LGBTQ person?
10. What is the most important thing an LGBTQ person needs?
11. If Jesus were to stand in front of an LGBTQ youth, what would he say?
12. How do you think religious beliefs affect a parents' attitudes towards their LGBTQ child?

Data Collection Procedure

An EVIDA digital voice recorder was used to record each interview. Interviews were then transcribed and coded into themes and subthemes using an inductive coding procedure.

Results

The researcher found that the interviewees' personal experiences, beliefs, and views were related to five themes, four of which had subthemes: Theme 1 was demographic factors (participants described how demographic factors were related to and affected someone's experience of queerphobia). Subtheme 1 for demographic factors was race/ethnicity and subtheme 2 was gender. Participants described how those identities impact someone's experience of LGBTQ religious inclusion. Theme 2 was religious experiences (how the participant's church conducts worship, and the church's attitudes/behavior towards LGBTQ people). Subtheme 1 for theme 2 was non-affirming views, subtheme 2 was affirming views, subtheme 3 was faith, subtheme 4 was prayer, and subtheme 5 was inclusion. Theme 3 was religious beliefs (how participants believe one should behave as a Christian). Subtheme 1 was love, subtheme 2 was Jesus, and subtheme 3 was the term "Child of God". Theme 4 was LGBTQ experiences (participant describes experience unique to LGBTQ people, and how the struggles that come with them are either helped or worsened by the church). Subtheme 1 for theme 4 was coming out, and subtheme 2 was societal progress. Theme 5 was role models (participant recalls what role models they had growing up).

Discussion

Demographic Factors

Gender

Participants shared their thoughts on how gender has been historically perceived in the church and how this perception continues to exist. Participants noted that traditional gender norms have hindered female constituents from serving as clergy members. Participant #2 described her experience in church, saying, "As a child and even a young adult growing up, I only saw men in churches. I didn't see women pastors. Women were only help". Participant #2 expressed how gender roles in church personally impacted the self-efficacy of female constituents like herself, adding "I didn't think I was worthy of making a positive change in my church until I saw women active in the clergy".

A frequent theme among participants was that churches must start making an active effort to be more gender-inclusive. This way, the gender division between male and female could be dismantled. Referencing conservative churches, Participant #3 noted, "they say family is the most important thing, a boy is a boy...a girl is a girl, the two should not cross—that's how they see religion". By being consciously aware of how conservative churches reinforce traditional gender roles, affirming churches can take active steps to do the opposite. Normalizing female representation as clergy members will encourage gender-inclusivity in churches. As a result, religion can be shared with different people and uplift groups who may feel discouraged from participating.

Race

Participants were introduced to a recent statistic stating that people of color (POC) LGBTQ people were 17% more likely to report a conflict between their religion and their sexual orientation (*Pew Research*, 2013). Participants shared why they believed this disproportionality exists. According to Participant 2, "They already have race problems where they are looked down upon to begin with, and then you throw the LGBTQ on top of it." A frequent theme was the belief that minority ethnic groups were more likely to reinforce traditional gender roles in the church. This creates a greater inner conflict in an LGBTQ person whose identity might not have aligned with their childhood standards. However, an African-American participant shared their experience of accepting a family member who was openly LGBTQ. They stated, "I had an uncle we considered gay. We didn't treat him any differently. We loved him and kept

him around; we liked to be around him”. This highlights that prejudice can be eliminated in any space that is accepting to all, regardless of the race of people present.

Overall, participants emphasized the need for greater understanding of the intersectionality of race and sexuality. Participant #2 said, “I think there should be more people trying to figure out why racial minorities can be more traditional”. Participant #5 proposed that people of color might misinterpret scripture to be oppressive, saying, “The images that we talk about in church can be misconstrued, like advent the season that we are in, we talk about going from darkness to light. Well some non-white people might think that you are saying white is good and black is bad”. Participants believed that the unique challenges of marginalized communities could be mitigated through promoting diversity in religious spaces. Participant #4 shared, “Obviously being black myself, I can say that racism, especially in predominantly white places, like white churches, would not be so prevalent if people saw people like me preaching. They would think, ‘Hey, we have a lot more in common than I thought’. And I think the same holds true for straight people seeing gay pastors. It’s all an empathy thing”. Using this logic, it becomes evident that the inclusion of minority groups within religious communities can foster empathy and help dismantle the walls of prejudice.

Religious Experiences

Non-affirming views

Participants highlighted the prevalence of non-affirming views in many churches, which could discourage LGBTQ individuals from attending service. One participant shared their experience of feeling discouraged from pursuing a pastoral role due to the non-affirming views of the Lutheran church, stating, “I was going to go into the Lutheran church and be a pastor here but their views on homosexuality were just miserable, really really bad”. Many churches risk losing LGBTQ members by not affirming their identities and accepting them into the congregation.

Affirming Views

In contrast, affirming views were characterized by participants as supportive and welcoming to all. Participants emphasized the importance of embracing LGBTQ people, with Participant #2 stating, “Our church is for everyone, the doors are open, we are there, we are a loving precedent, we support people in the journey that they are in...no one is unwelcome”. Affirming views show to the public that the church can be a place to seek solace no matter one’s personal circumstance. According to Participant #3, “I think that what helps LGBTQ people when they find a church is that they find a loving community that can support them unilaterally, not just as a gay person but as neighbor, as a friend, and as a careperson.”

Inclusion

Churches can showcase affirming views through conscious efforts of inclusion. One example of these efforts is the public display of pride flags. Participant #6 stated, “We just had a woman come to the church...who came because we had a rainbow flag...and thought that maybe we would be a safe space because of that”. Participant #1 shared a similar experience, saying, “To show that there is no separation between gay and straight in the church, we do have a p-flag. I realized it was pretty well-received, at least by our congregations. I think churches who really want to, you know, embrace all different kinds of people in the church should have a pride flag at least somewhere”. Participants also pointed to small acts of inclusion as being a profound factor in promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion in church. For example, participants described how their sermons are often altered to use more inclusive dialogue. Participant #2 shared, “I no longer use “He” when referring to God, because God has no gender. I find that assigning a gender to God perpetuates this idea that males are the superior being, when in reality, all people are equally valuable”. These efforts can make constituents feel that their presence is seen and recognized. Diversity and inclusion can be promoted through inclusive acts and language.

Prayer

When asked what LGBTQ people likely pray about, some participants suggested that they may pray specifically for love and acceptance. Participant #1 said, “I think they pray for acceptance...for a relationship with God that lets them be completely who they are...I do think they pray for that relationship with everybody, to love somebody, and to have them love them back”. Some participants also stated that LGBTQ people pray about the same things non-LGBTQ people pray about. Participant #5 said, “I think they pray for their families, their loved ones, their health, just any concerns the rest of us could have, their love for God”. These responses revealed what participants believed LGBTQ people’s personal concerns were. This information can be used to build both empathy and relatability towards LGBTQ people.

Religious beliefs

Jesus

Participants were asked to imagine how Jesus, a prominent figure in Christianity, would treat an LGBTQ individual. Their responses revealed a consistent theme of compassion, with the majority of participants using the phrase “I love you” to describe how Jesus would interact with LGBTQ individuals. Participants indicated non-affirming religious institutions may hold views towards LGBTQ individuals that are not consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Participant #3 said, “Jesus taught love. Nothing but love. If you’re going around telling people that their way of living is inherently wrong, that is not love”. Participants highlighted the necessity for religious leaders to incorporate love and compassion towards all individuals as central tenets of Christian teachings, as demonstrated by the example of Jesus Christ.

Love

Participants also discussed the role of love in religion. Participants expressed the growing necessity for love to be extended to the LGBTQ community. Participant #4 emphasized that in order for Christianity to cultivate a better public reputation, love must be at the forefront. They noted, “By being an oasis of love, we can restore our roots as a faith of being people who follow Jesus and who love unconditionally”. This is a reference to the original Christian scriptures which described God’s intentions of creating a loving world, where people are meant to treat one another with the same benevolence that Jesus taught.

LGBTQ Experiences

Coming out

Participants described the psychological and social impact of sharing one's sexual identity with the world, with specific emphasis on the need for support during the coming out process. Oftentimes, LGBTQ people may view their sexual identity as something shameful or negative. Participant #2 shared, “When I got older and realized I was different, I thought of all the disappointment it would bring to the people around me if they knew I was gay”. However, being surrounded with LGBTQ people and support could have a positive impact, especially in the church. Participant #1 stated, “I had a couple colleagues in grad school that really kind of helped shape my sense of, ‘Oh this is nothing to be ashamed of, this is not a failure’”, highlighting the importance of supportive individuals during the coming out process. The role and visibility of LGBTQ individuals/allies in church could reduce stigma around sexual minorities. Participant #2 stated, “I think having an openly-gay clergy member probably provides a role model for young LGBTQ people to know...that this church is a church of acceptance”. In addition, participants pointed to resources that their churches provide LGBTQ people struggling with coming out, such as counseling, guided prayer, and support groups. Ultimately, LGBTQ-affirming churches sought to alleviate the common difficulty of the coming out process.

Societal Progress

Participants provided their perspectives on how society had advanced or declined in the acceptance of LGBTQ people. All participants acknowledged that prejudice against LGBTQ people is a widespread issue. They pointed to externalized and internalized homophobia as contributors to the issue. Participant #1 stated, “LGBTQ individuals don’t just get rejection from others, but often from ourselves, too. That’s why we see things like hate crimes to our community and suicide in our community”. Still, 5/6 participants maintained that society had come a long way from where it used to be. Participant #4 stated, “There’s still really a long way to go for that group of people who identify like that but we have made great progress”. The results suggest that LGBTQ-affirming church clergy are highly likely to acknowledge the presence of discrimination against LGBTQ people in today’s society. This incentivizes them to hold anti-biased viewpoints and work towards making their church an inclusive space.

Role Models

Participants were asked to reflect on their childhood experiences and individuals who served as their role models. There was a positive relationship between participants’ exposure to LGBTQ-accepting role models and their current progressive views towards LGBTQ people. All participants reported having a role model growing up who was, or would have been, accepting towards LGBTQ people. Participant #1 stated, “I had an uncle we considered gay we didn’t treat him any differently. We loved him and kept him around, we liked to be around him”. Given that religion is often taught from a very young age (Sciupac, Diamant, 2020) this highlights the importance of fostering inclusive attitudes within Christianity from early childhood or adolescence. Being surrounded by open-minded individuals has long-lasting impacts on developing inclusive mindsets. This information can be utilized to raise future generations of open-minded individuals.

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to explore the perspectives of LGBTQ-affirming Christian church clergy on LGBTQ people and how they worked to increase inclusivity in church spaces. The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design, and six clergy members from various LGBTQ-affirming churches in California were interviewed. The study revealed five key themes that might impact an LGBTQ person’s participation in church: demographic factors, religious experiences, religious beliefs, LGBTQ experiences, and the beliefs that childhood role models held. The research has implications for society and non-affirming churches, as it provides valuable insight into how churches can create more accepting and diverse spaces for LGBTQ communities within religious institutions. By understanding these views and strategies, it is possible to expand religion into an accepting outlet for all people seeking spiritual guidance and support. Ultimately, this work contributes to building a more equitable society for all.

Limitations

Limitations to this research include the small sample size of six clergy members from LGBTQ-affirming churches in California. This limits the generalizability of the findings and may not fully capture the perspectives and experiences of all clergy members who affirm LGBTQ individuals. Another limitation could be the use of self-report, as participants may not be fully transparent in their responses due to social desirability bias. Finally, the study only focuses on the viewpoints of LGBTQ-affirming church clergy, half of whom did not identify within the community. Therefore, the findings may not represent the personal experiences and feelings of LGBTQ individuals in religious spaces.

Acknowledgements

The researcher was fortunate to have had the guidance of an online mentor, Jenny Xu, B.A., who is a distinguished member of Polygence - an online academy promoting access to research opportunities for high school students. The researcher extends gratitude to Jenny for her contribution towards the development of this article.

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