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Exploring the Lived Religious Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Ordained Clergy in the United Methodist Church

Abstract

The United Methodist Church (UMC) as an institution has strict language against lesbian and gay people and against the ordination of the lesbian and gay people. Prior research has focused on how denominations and congregations discuss issues around sexuality, how attitudes have shifted around issues of sexuality, and how to provide spiritual care for the LGBTQ+ community. This qualitative study interviewed lesbian and gay ordained elders in the UMC to learn about their experiences of serving as clergy people in the UMC even though there are prohibitive statements in church documents. Firstly, the interviews revealed that the participants feel loved and called by God and are attempting to live into their vocation. Secondly, they have ways of negotiating in the church, which include strategically deciding to whom they reveal their sexuality, the language they use in communicating their truth, serving in extension ministries, and feeling the pressure to do good work. Finally, cultural shifts have helped with the negotiating power of the participants. A final theme discusses why the participants stay in the church. The participants stay in the UMC because of relationships they have formed and it is their theological home, they see themselves as prophetic witnesses and they have hope in progress. This study reveals that lesbian and gay clergy are not incompatible with Christian teaching, but genuinely living into their vocation and serving God. This research provides the space for lesbian and gay clergy to tell their stories in hopes that LGBTQ+ might gain more credibility as religious leaders in the church.

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Exploring the Lived Religious Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Ordained Clergy in the
United Methodist Church

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD
Program

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Tracy Temple

June 2019

Advisor: Katherine Turpin

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Abstract

The United Methodist Church (UMC) as an institution has strict language against lesbian and gay people and against the ordination of the lesbian and gay people. Prior research has focused on how denominations and congregations discuss issues around sexuality, how attitudes have shifted around issues of sexuality, and how to provide spiritual care for the LGBTQ+ community. This qualitative study interviewed lesbian and gay ordained elders in the UMC to learn about their experiences of serving as clergy people in the UMC even though there are prohibitive statements in church documents. Firstly, the interviews revealed that the participants feel loved and called by God and are attempting to live into their vocation. Secondly, they have ways of negotiating in the church, which include strategically deciding to whom they reveal their sexuality, the language they use in communicating their truth, serving in extension ministries, and feeling the pressure to do good work. Finally, cultural shifts have helped with the negotiating power of the participants. A final theme discusses why the participants stay in the church. The participants stay in the UMC because of relationships they have formed and it is their theological home, they see themselves as prophetic witnesses and they have hope in progress. This study reveals that lesbian and gay clergy are not incompatible with Christian teaching, but genuinely living into their vocation and serving God. This research provides the space for lesbian and gay clergy to tell their stories in hopes that LGBTQ+ might gain more credibility as religious leaders in the church.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the guiding principles of The United Methodist Church (UMC) found in the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, church policy declares, that “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,”¹ and continues by stating that

while persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.²

Despite this prohibition, gay and lesbian ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church serve their communities and the world. This research seeks to address the personal and public negotiations in which gay and lesbian ordained clergy are engaged as they occupy this prohibited space, and the potential violence this causes to their understanding of self through the process. The United Methodist church has been debating, adding to, and taking away, language about the lives of people who identify with the LGBTQ community since the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church merged to form the United Methodist Church.

¹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016) 113.

² Ibid, 226.

This project arose from my desire to provide space for lesbian and gay ordained elders in the United Methodist Church (UMC) to share their experiences of serving the church that still has language in the institution's *Book of Discipline*, or the book of rules and guidelines for the institutional church, declaring lesbian and gay people incompatible with Christian teaching. I am interested in exploring and learning from the lived experiences of lesbian and gay clergy serving in the United Methodist Church as heard from lesbian and gay clergy. For this project, I used qualitative research methods in interviewing participants serving the United Methodist Church (UMC) who also identify as lesbian or gay. The interviews were analyzed to draw out themes that were evident in the interviews. These themes are explored in following chapters.

My interest in this project developed as I reflected on my own experiences in the UMC as a gay man and my exploration of potentially entering the candidacy process to be ordained in the UMC. I ultimately abandoned the idea of pursuing ordination, but still wanted to know and have a clearer understanding of the experiences of lesbian and gay people who are ordained and serving the church. In addition, my hope is that the church as an institution will change the harmful language in the *Discipline* to reflect a more loving and welcoming attitude toward all of God's creation. However, as the principal researcher for this project, I bracketed my own experiences during the interviews, the evaluation of the interviews, and the interpretation and analysis of the interviews. A significant example is that I entered this research project presupposing I would find examples of people who experienced institutional violence and felt dehumanized by the church. However, as will be discovered, the interviews revealed something quite different with the participants.

Review of prior research

Prior research has been conducted on the relationship between Christian religious organizations and the LGBTQ community. Prior research and writings have been focused on queer theologies (Cheng 2011, Althaus-Reid 2000, Larrimore and Talvacchia 2014, Goss 1994), personal narratives (Gold and Drucker 2008, Austin 2006, Williams 2019), and practical theologies of care (Burr 2009, Bigner and Gottlieb 2006, Kundtz and Schlager 2007, Graham 1997). In addition, there are studies that examine particular Christian religious movements and sexuality. For example, social psychologist Lynne Gerber's study on weight loss and sexual reorientation provides insights into how evangelical Christianity is working to maintain a hold on the body and its construction of sin around these issues.³ Gerber's study provides an example of the use of various research methods including, participant observation, interviews, and content analysis of ministry materials in her research.

Religious studies scholar Tanya Erzen's study on the ex-gay movement provides an excellent example of ethnographic work that provided insight into the actual lived experiences of the participants.⁴ Through participant observation and interviews she hoped to gain some knowledge of the diverse worldviews held by the participants in the ex-gay ministry. Erzen also used archival research to access the history of the movement and its participants. In this study, Erzen attempted to be as objective as possible. Erzen's

³ Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁴ Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-gay Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

findings revealed the viewpoints and perspectives of participants in an ex-gay ministry as they attempt to create a new sexual identity that conforms to the normative strictures of their religious tradition. The reader is given a glimpse of how a group of people attempt to change their sexuality to better align with their religious tradition.

Sociologist Dawne Moon's study *God, Sex, and Politics* provides another example of ethnographic research on religion and sexuality.⁵ Moon situates herself firmly in the field of sociology of religion, however, unlike Erzen, Moon labels herself as a critical sociologist and her study as a critical ethnography. Moon utilized participant observation and interviews to gather information to explore the theological and social worlds of the two United Methodist congregations. Moon's findings reveal how two different United Methodist Congregations, one in a large city context and the other in a much smaller city context, discuss and understand sexuality in relation to their own understandings of faith and the church. Moon's findings reveal how congregations talk about sexuality, but these findings do not reveal specific information about actual members of the LGBTQ community and how they experience life in the church.

There are studies that focus on clergy and their views on homosexuality. For example, sociologists Laura Olson and Wendy Cadge discuss the views of mainline protestant clergy on homosexuality and the frameworks they utilize to guide their discussions.⁶ This study does not address the ordination of gays and lesbians specifically,

⁵ Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, & Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁶ Laura R. Olson and Wendy Cadge, "Talking about Homosexuality: The Views of Mainline Protestant Clergy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2002: 153-167.

but just the debate on homosexuality in general. Within the list of frames used in the debate, denominational struggle was the most often cited framework in which the discussion took place. In addition, Olson and Cadge highlight the language used when talking about homosexuality in the church community. For example, Olson and Cadge delineate if the clergy members used homosexuality, or sexuality in general. This study provides an interesting nuance to the debate, but does not discuss gay and lesbian ordained clergy.

In a related study, sociologists Christopher Wildeman and Wendy Cadge focus on roles that mainline clergy assume in their congregations when discussing homosexuality.⁷ Cadge and Wildeman find that clergy assume either a facilitator role or an advocate role. These roles are most of the time determined by the personal opinion and stance of the clergy on the topic of homosexuality. The findings of this study reveal how individual clergy address the issue of homosexuality in their congregations, but it does not focus on the United Methodist Church and does not specifically name gay or lesbian ordination in the UMC.

There are additional studies examining specific church denominations and how these denominations discuss sexuality and religion that have been published in journals (e.g. Wood and Bloch 1995, Wellman 1999, Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007, Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). A study examining the United Methodist Church as it struggles with issues surrounding LGBT inclusion is Amanda Udis-Kessler's study of

⁷ Wendy Cadge and Christopher Wildeman, "Facilitators and Advocates: How Mainline Protestant Clergy Respond to Homosexuality," *Sociological Perspectives*, 2008: 587-603.

the UMC's 2000 General Conference.⁸ Udis-Kessler's work is an ethnographic study in which she hopes to examine "how people understand situations...how those understandings are linked to choices that they make...how those choices (directly or indirectly) impact themselves and others."⁹ Udis-Kessler's study provides fascinating field notes from the General Conference, and she provides insights for improving strategies for institutional change for the LGBT community and allies, even if in my opinion, these suggestions are too assimilationist in nature. By this, I mean that Udis-Kessler urges LGBTQ United Methodists to work at being seen as "normal."¹⁰

My study will add to the conversation by providing space for the lived experiences of gay and lesbian ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church to be heard. It is significant because the studies that have been carried out so far demonstrate how congregations and denominations are working through traditional views on homosexuality, but no study with the focus being gay and lesbian clergy in the United Methodist Church and the negotiations required of them has been carried out. My hope through this research is to provide space for the voices of the queer community, voices that often remain engaged with their faith communities even though they recognize that they are considered less than, or conceptualized as the "other." Their voices add a nuanced depth to the conversation, because they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in the debate. The conversation and research can only be strengthened by the addition of

⁸ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁹ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰ Ibid, 190.

diverse voices and experiences. This study examines the negotiations of gay and lesbian ordained clergy as they occupy the space between the church's policy and the changing cultural views toward LGBT people. The stance taken by the United Methodist Church's policy against homosexuality and the ordination of openly gay and lesbian people requires those people seeking ordination to eliminate, deny, or lie about a portion of their self-understanding as a gay or lesbian person. In the interviews I conducted for this study, three themes emerged.

One theme that was found in all the interviews was the belief that they were deeply loved by God. Not only the belief of being loved, but feeling and *knowing* this love in an existential sense was crucial to their self-understanding. A second theme was the negotiation of the system. All of the participants noted that they used specific language to remain authentic, but still protect themselves from negative consequences from the institutional church. A third theme that emerged from the interviews was their motivation to facilitate change within the institutional church. Although the church's language is hurtful and degrading, they choose to remain in the church to be examples for younger gay and lesbian people. I hope that this research serves as a reminder that we are not discussing an issue, but lives of people that are beloved, children of God.

Chapter Two: Methodology

As noted earlier, previous research used interviews, ethnographic research, content analysis of documents, and recorded histories for data gathering. These tools provided multiple points of entry into the religious lives of the congregations and people engaged with religious organizations, providing a broad picture of the meaning and utility of religion in these contexts. However, important voices are noticeably absent from studies on denominational and congregational conversations. These are the voices of lesbian and gay pastors¹¹. Allowing the space for the voices of lesbian and gay ordained elders to be heard in the conversation adds crucial information and depth to the discussion on religions and sexuality and also a reminder that these discussions involve actual people that are serving God and leading the church.

Phenomenology Design

The word phenomenology finds its roots in the Greek word “phaenesthai, to flare up, to show itself, to appear...phenomenon means to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show itself in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of day.”¹²

Phenomenology focuses on a particular experience from the individual’s perspective experiencing the “thing.” Phillis Knaack states “phenomenology is the study of

¹¹ For this study, the terms pastor, clergy, and elder are synonymous and are used interchangeably.

¹² Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 26.

experience from the actor's particular perspective."¹³ Sokolowski states that, "phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience."¹⁴ Researchers using phenomenological methods are interested in incorporating philosophy into human experience, that is, the experience of a phenomenon.¹⁵ In this particular study of lesbian and gay clergy, I am interested in exploring the experiences of lesbian and gay clergy as they serve the church.

Philosopher Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, began the discussion of the new movement known as phenomenology. This philosophy deals with appearances and "insists that parts are only understood against the background of appropriate wholes, that manifolds of appearance harbor identities, and that absences make no sense except as played off against the presences that can be achieved through them."¹⁶ In other words, as we become conscious of what is being presented to us, realizing there are other angles of the phenomenon that are not presenting, or being made visible, at the moment we are closer to knowing truth.

Psychologist Clark Moustakas differentiates two approaches in phenomenological research. The first is empirical phenomenological research. In empirical phenomenological research, the researcher uses the descriptions provided by the

¹³ Phyllis Knaack, "Phenomenological Research," *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 6, no. 1 (1984): 107-114, 107.

¹⁴ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 4.

participants to “determine the underlying structures of an experience.”¹⁷ In other words, the participants’ descriptions of the experiences provide the foundation upon which the meanings are derived. In this type of phenomenology, the researcher’s experience is part of the interpretive portion of the study.

In contrast to this type of phenomenology is transcendental phenomenology. Although it shares similarities with empirical phenomenology, it differs in its starting point. When a researcher begins a transcendental phenomenology, the researcher brackets out, or sets aside, one’s own experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon. Additionally, in transcendental phenomenology, emphasis is placed on “intuition, imagination, and universal structures”¹⁸ to gain understanding of the phenomenon.

In my study of the lived religious experiences of gay and lesbian ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church, I bracketed out my own experience of entering into the process of candidacy to be ordained. The process of bracketing involved keeping a journal throughout the interview process which provided a space for me to reflect on my own experiences as I was hearing the experiences of the participants. Awareness of my own experiences allowed me to prevent them from unduly influencing participants’ responses. Additionally, when I created index cards for the coding process, I used in vivo coding, that is, the exact words used by the participants in their interview responses. This assisted in keeping the participants’ responses closer to their own experiences. However, bracketing was not as necessary for certain experiences. For example, I do not have the

¹⁷ Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 13.

¹⁸ Ibid, 22.

experience of actually working in the church as an ordained elder. Not having this experience assisted in the process of seeing as if “for the first time”¹⁹ the experiences of gay and lesbian clergy.

What is not bracketed out in the study is a theological understanding of how people experience life, community, and their world. Due to their graduate theological training in seminary and the context in which they live out their professional lives, that is the church, the participants understand their lives in theological terms and make particular theological claims in the sharing of their stories. One of things I am interested in is the participants’ understanding of what it means to be in continuous response to God and the how these responses shape their central concerns both personally and communally. Therefore, I use theological terms in exploring their experiences and make some theological claims in response to these stories.

Research Question

As stated above, this study explored the experiences of gay and lesbian ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church (UMC). The UMC does not officially allow the ordination of gays and lesbians, however, there are gays and lesbians serving as pastors in the churches. This study provides a space for lesbian and gay ordained elders to share their experiences in the UMC. My overarching question for this research revolved around the kind of negotiations lesbian and gay ordained elders participate in while serving in their professional capacity. These negotiations included personal, communal, and spiritual matters. I used a loosely structured interview protocol, and asked open-

¹⁹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 80.

ended questions because I was interested in hearing about their spiritual background and how they came to be involved with the UMC. I was also interested in how and why these clergy people stayed in the United Methodist Church.

Sampling Method

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is the selection of individuals who can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.”²⁰ This study’s participants consisted of seven participants and was limited to lesbian and gay ordained elders in the UMC. Since this study is interested in lesbian and gay ordained clergy in The United Methodist Church, the small purposeful sample population was bounded by the individual’s characteristic of identifying as gay or lesbian and being an ordained clergy member in the UMC.

The initial sample of four was constructed of clergy acquaintances I knew identified as lesbian or gay. Three additional participants were obtained through the snowball technique. I asked the initial participants if they knew other lesbian or gay ordained elders and asked the participants to pass along my contact information so that the other people could contact me if they were interested in participating. The participants determined the “place” of the interview so that they felt comfortable in sharing their experiences. Two of the interviews took place in the homes of the participants and the other five took place in the participants’ offices.

All of the participants in the sample population identified as white, and two were female and five were male. Additionally, one participant’s age was in the 30-39 range, three participants were in the 40-49 range, one in the 50-59 age range, and 2 were in the

²⁰ Ibid, 156.

60 or over category. A larger sample was challenging to find for this study because of the risk of potential participants losing their position and livelihood if they were out, or outed, in the church. For this reason, I used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the study. Furthermore, there are many cultural and societal complexities that are woven into the fabric of one's sexuality and the concept of being out.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods employed in this research were interviews using a loosely structured interview protocol. The interviews began with questions about the participants' age range, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Following these demographic questions, I proceeded with an open-ended question. An important aspect of the formal ordination process through which all clergy in the UMC must maneuver is the sharing of one's spiritual autobiography. The spiritual autobiography details one's early life in church, or lack of it, and the journey that has led to the answering of one's call to ministry. The spiritual autobiography is a thorough examination of one's life and the influences of people, church, and society on that life. Spiritual autobiographies reveal important aspects about how one views God, church, society, community, and faith. I began the interviews by asking the participant if they would share their spiritual journey that led to ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church.

Along with this open-ended question, there was a secondary interview protocol (appendix A) that was intended to help the interview progress and gain insight into the participant's experiences. In addition, the interview protocol helped draw out the important life history and narratives of the individuals and keep the interview within

some set of guidelines for the research. The loosely structured interview protocol included questions designed to assist in the interview process, as well as, questions that helped to locate the individuals in categories of age, gender identity, and race and/or ethnicity.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

All interviews were recorded and stored in a secure location. From these recordings I created a verbatim transcript. All of this information, the recordings and the transcripts, was saved as a reference to check credibility and faithfulness to the responses.

In addition, credibility and trustworthiness were established for the seven participants by three factors using the information from the interviews. The first element that helped establish credibility and trustworthiness was through my own personal relationships with some of the participants, and additionally, my own observation of the individual during the interview. A second factor contributing to credibility was through the identification of similar experiences among the participants of which a theme was drawn out. Thirdly, an examination of historical documents from the church chronicling the policy changes, assisted in solidifying the credibility of the participants' stories.

Finally, to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, my dissertation committee has access to the transcripts, codes, and themes that develop in the analysis phase. The committee has the ability to read the primary information from which I am drawing my data. Through this access, the committee can assist in maintaining integrity to the data gathered.

Analysis

Analysis of the data began during the interviews with the participants. I took notes and created some initial coding during the actual interview. According to Saldana, coding should actually begin during the interview.²¹ After listening to the interview and reading the transcript, the first round of coding used in vivo coding to capture the essence of what was said during the interview. This type of coding uses actual phrases the participant said in the interview as the code. After this initial round of in vivo coding, I returned to the transcript and used emotion coding and values coding. Emotion coding “labels the feelings participants may have experienced...[and] values coding assesses a participant’s integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work.”²² These codes were then consolidated into groups of similar meaning. This process involved writing the codes on index cards and grouping these codes into categories that were similar, which allowed themes to emerge from the data.

It is in this process of finding the themes of the interviews that the concept of “intuition” found in phenomenology became clear. Moustakas states that, “Descartes held intuition to be primary, an inborn talent directed ‘toward producing solid and true judgments concerning everything that presents itself’.”²³ Intuition is crucial to describe whatever presents itself through the interviews, because through this process, the essence of the phenomenon will be revealed. It is often an intuitive process of naming a theme

²¹ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013).

²² Ibid, 105.

²³ Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 32.

that is derived from the data. I attempted to allow my intuition and judgment to be formed by the knowledge gained by listening to the words and stories of the participants, and also watching their body language and behavior during the interviews. I was careful to not allow my own experiences bend their stories to mesh with my own limited experiences.

For example, if I am honest, I have hurt and anger toward the church for its stance about LGBTQ people. I was cautious to not allow these feelings to read into participants' responses and experiences in the church. What I discovered in their responses was their love for the church and the people in the church. Even though there was an element of hurt and anger, it was not the focus of their responses. It would have been easy for my own experience to read more hurt and anger into their responses, which would have not been a faithful representation of the themes that emerged.

In order to remain close to the participants' intentions, I used in vivo coding when creating index cards with words or phrases that appeared to be central concerns in their interviews. From these cards, I sorted them into piles, grouping the cards that contained similar ideas or concerns. The process of sorting the cards helped to draw out the themes that form the discussion of this research.

The three themes that emerged through the interviews provided valuable insight into the experiences of the individuals. The first theme was the belief that they were loved and called by God. This theme emerged from the participants' sharing their spiritual autobiographies. It revealed transformational experiences, assurances of God's love, and the participants' understanding of calling and vocation.

The second main theme dealt with ways of negotiating the institutional church. One of the subthemes that emerged from how participants negotiated the institutional church included being selective in coming out. The participants who decided to come out, were strategic in choosing the people, place, and time. Additionally, the pastors were careful in the language they used when speaking their truth, but always worked to speak truth in their contexts. A second subtheme involved the participants finding extension ministries in which to serve. This provided a way to distance themselves from parish ministry and the institutional church. A third subtheme in negotiating the system involved their belief that doing good work protected them from unwarranted scrutiny. Finally, cultural shifts in attitudes toward the LGBTQ community seem to be assisting in shift of negotiating power for lesbian and gay clergy.

The third and final theme revolved around the question of why stay in the UMC. The first subtheme developed around the relationships that were formed in the church and the subsequent creation of a theological home. In their specific congregations, participants experienced transformation, acceptance, and sustaining relationships, and through these experiences they have developed profound connections to the UMC. Secondly, they stay in the UMC to be a prophetic witness for other LGBTQ people. They want other LGBTQ people to know there is a place for them in the church and want to help the church expand its understanding of who is included in God's family. The fourth and final subtheme for why they stay, is they see progress in the church. Although affirmation of LGBTQ people as beloved children of God is happening slowly, the

I think it is important to this study and analysis that I am open about why and how I enter into the conversation and what I needed to bracket out for the analysis of the

interviews. I believe I felt a call to ministry in the church as early as high school. However, I also knew that I was gay and that it was not acceptable in the church. Finally at age 26, I decided I would try to enter the candidacy process as a closeted gay man. However, when I met with the district board of ordained ministry, I quickly tired of answering the “do you have a girlfriend, do you want a girlfriend, do you want to get married, do you want children, etc,” questions. I was fairly certain they were trying to find out about my sexuality. I left the meeting disheartened and disappointed. Eight years later I began seminary and realized there were other ways to serve other than direct Parish ministry. However, I am interested in helping the church move in a direction that expands its understanding of human sexuality. More importantly, I am concerned with the wider ramifications of the current beliefs held by the church as an institution and the effects on LGBTQ youth growing up in the church. Although my experiences motivate my inquiry and inform my critique of the current situation in the church, these experiences do not inhibit my openness in hearing and learning through others’ experiences.

Chapter Three: Theory

The research for this project was carried out within a framework of lived religions approach, which historian Robert Orsi characterizes as emphasizing “embodied practice and imagination, as men, women and children exist in and move through their built and found environments.”²⁴ Sociologist Nancy Ammerman describes the lived religion approach to studying religion as an approach that goes beyond the religious experts and institutions and values the everyday religious experiences and practices of non-experts. For Ammerman, this approach is a way to more fully explore the varying range of religious possibilities. The lived religion approach counters the narrative that tends to separate the spiritual and the religious, thus creating a notion that if there is more of one than there is less of the other.²⁵ Additionally, this approach provides insight to the “recognition that all institutional boundaries—including religious ones—are porous.”²⁶ In other words, the narratives, beliefs, rituals, and other elements that construct a religious life are often deployed in ways that expand upon institutional narratives, practices, and theologies. The way religion is lived out in the world is some variation of the institutional norm.

²⁴ Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), xxxix.

²⁵ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

The variations from the institutional norms has the potential to develop tensions between the institution and the members who proclaim some level of commitment to the institution. The case of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the UMC provides an example of the institution stating one belief and many of its members living out a different reality. There is tension between the institutional church's declaration that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and several of its members living out a religious reality that counters the anti-LGBTQ+ policy. Using a lived religion approach this study documents how the UMC's own ordained lesbian and gay clergy are living out a Christian life that differs from the institutional policy. Using this approach for this project allowed for themes to be drawn out of the interviews and these themes were explored deeper through multiple lenses.

One of the lenses through which the themes that emerged from the data are explored is queer theory. Queer theory arose from a critique of feminist literary theory. The critique was that feminist literary theory perpetuated received understandings of gender, both masculinity and femininity, thereby idealizing a particular form of gender expression.²⁷ The critique was that this thinking could lead to creating new structures that would determine which gender expressions were deemed acceptable and which ones were deemed incompatible. This critique, which became known as queer theory, sought to create a place where new possibilities of identity could flourish, but not be limited by predetermined, or prescribed, notions of what is acceptable. Queer theory, understood as “a ‘zone of possibilities’ always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), viii.

articulate,”²⁸ provided a variety of angles to analyze the data from the research. Queer theory is used as a theoretical lens in this study because of its ability to destabilize seemingly fixed categories constructed by those in power. For example, creating categories of whose sexuality is acceptable or unacceptable in religious worlds. Destabilizing the line of exclusion opens up new possibilities for inclusion. The potentialities that are not yet fully realized, but are still hanging in the air waiting to materialize, are present in the lives of the participants and provide hope for a future where an expanded understanding of who is called into service of God and the church is the guiding principle.

Calling and vocation emerged as a theme from the interviews. The theoretical lens through which the concepts of calling and vocation are read is the understanding of vocation as “who we are, trying to happen.”²⁹ This understanding of vocation illuminates the idea that there is an innate feeling inside of a person that they are trying to make a physical reality. Parker Palmer names this as an undivided life;³⁰ how we are striving for wholeness in our lives. This wholeness includes responding to God’s love and call on our lives.

²⁸ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

²⁹ John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 5.

³⁰ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004).

Furthermore, clinical psychologist John Neafsey's understanding that vocation, or calling, "is not only about what we *do* but about *who we are*,"³¹ underscores the intimate and internal nature of life's work. The understanding of "who we are" is reflected in John Wesley's three questions about a person's grace, gifts, and fruit "for those who understand themselves to be called to set-apart ministry."³² More specifically, these questions are:

- (1) Do they know God as pardoning God? Have they the love of God abiding in them? Do they desire nothing but God? Are they holy in all manner of conversation?
- (2) Have they gifts, as well as evidence of God's grace, for the work? Have they a clear, sound understanding; a right judgment in the things of God; a just conception of salvation by faith? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly?
- (3) Have they fruit? Have any been truly convinced of sin and converted to God, and are believers edified by their service? (¶ 310.1)³³

These questions provide a framework in which participants in the candidacy process can begin to evaluate their life in light of a new understanding of God's call on their lives. Reflecting on these questions that "frame interviews with candidates"³⁴ for ordination, allows the participant to name and work toward a clearer understanding of their calling and who God is inviting them to be. Participants, or candidates, are encouraged to consider many factors in the accounting for their spiritual journey and gifts for ministry.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry The United Methodist Church, *Answering the Call: Candidacy Guidebook* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 60.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

These factors include: family of origin, family of choice, current family and primary relationships, friends, community of support, sex, gender, age, race, ethnicity, body, socioeconomic background, religious experiences, and education.³⁵ Most, if not all, of these factors exhibit some level of influence on the religious experiences recounted in the spiritual narrative, or spiritual autobiography.

Because of the religious and spiritual nature of the experiences shared by the participants, theological language is a salient feature of the participants' ability to articulate these moments. Foundational to these events is the belief that God is working, both directly and indirectly, in the lives of the participants. These events in the participants lives become statements about the nature of God and how God works in the world. Additionally, as the researcher, I use theological language to discuss these experiences as I explore deeper connections in these events and how the participants speak about God.

How a person speaks about being loved by God becomes a point of recognition of belonging to the group, or in the case of ordination as elder in the United Methodist Church, a point of recognition that one is called to lead a congregation. Judith Butler's work *Giving an Account of Oneself*, offers insight into the idea of recognition and how one creates one's own self-narrative to be recognized by a certain other. According to Butler, "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or a set of relations—to a set of norms."³⁶ The participants' interviews began with being asked to

³⁵ Ibid, 62-64.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 8.

share their spiritual autobiography. Through these spiritual autobiographies run common threads that lend themselves to being understood as the person being called to leadership in the church. Although these stories are particular to the individual's experience, they can be read in a broader shared framework that others recognize as a story that belongs or fits the overall narrative of the United Methodist Church's understanding of being called to ministry.

However, the person is not "bound to established forms of subject formation...but [is] bound to the sociality of any of those possible relations."³⁷ In other words, the person is now in relationship with those in the group, due to narrating a self that is recognizable as belonging, but still has the potential to reveal the parts of a self that one has edited out to avoid the risk of not being recognized. However, the parts one edits out still carry the risk of rupturing or transforming a particular historical horizon,³⁸ providing a way to view the stories heard in the data as one's attempt to be recognized within an organization, but through living into their true selves leading to a new recognition of who is called into ministry.

Living into their true selves required the participants to develop ways to negotiate the system with which they are engaged. The second set of themes that emerged from the interviews, the themes around negotiating the system, is read through the lens of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's examination of coming out as a member of the LGBTQ community. Through Sedgwick's work of deconstructing culturally produced

³⁷ Ibid, 114.

³⁸ Ibid, 115.

“structuring binarisms” she intends to display the “instability of the binarism itself.”³⁹ In this work, Sedgwick destabilizes the seemingly static nature of the boundary of the closet. When negotiating the institutional parameters of the UMC, the participants in this study represented a spectrum of being out to people in positions of power. The coming out of the participants to particular people was a strategic action that invited the people in powerful positions into a shared space of the closet. The “difference between ‘public’ and ‘private’ could [no longer] be stably or intelligibly represented as a difference between two concrete classes of physical space.”⁴⁰ In other words, the person who now had the knowledge of the participant’s sexuality could no longer claim ignorance and was left to decide what to do about the matter.

Sedgwick describes the “immense productive power of the strategically located, strategically maneuvered double bind.”⁴¹ The person in the position of power is now left with the decision of what to do with the newly acquired knowledge. As one participant stated, “they had already ordained me, and now they had to decide if they were willing to say that they had made a mistake or find another way to carry on.” Sedgwick’s argument helps to see that the decisions made by the person in the power seat are tremendously productive, in that, unless the person was willing to bring charges against the lesbian or gay clergy person, the lesbian or gay clergy person would maintain legitimacy (and rightly so) as a leader in the church.

³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 92.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 110.

⁴¹ Ibid, 124.

Another method the participants shared in negotiating the institutional church was through finding positions in extension ministries. Michel Foucault's discussion of panopticism and Bentham's panopticon,⁴² is informative in examining some of the stories shared by the participants in the interviews. Foucault states that "the major effect of the Panopticon... [is] to induce... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."⁴³ The UMC as an institution maintains its presence in the lives and minds of its clergy through specific requirements made on the clergy members. Clergy people working in an extension ministry distanced themselves from parish ministry and the consistent gaze of their parishioners and the communities in which they would serve, however, the participants in this study were fully aware that they were still accountable to the institutional church.

Another subtheme emerging from the interviews was the belief of the participants that if they worked hard and did good work, the church would leave them alone. The political philosophy of meritocracy provided a fruitful way to engage the discussion of an American work ethic and why these participants felt that doing good work assisted in protecting them from the institutional church.

The final set of themes that emerged from the interviews revolved around the participants' motivation to facilitate change in the church. Engaging with a queer feminist concept of "(Be)Coming Out,"⁴⁴ illuminated "coming out" as a process and not a

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

⁴³ Ibid, 201.

⁴⁴ Shane Phelan, "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics," *Signs* (The University of Chicago Press), 1993: 765-790.

singular moment. Just as coming out is a process, working for institutional change is also a process and not just a singular moment. The concept of life as a process helped understand the participants' decision to stay in the church because they are engaged in, and committed to, the process of institutional change.

The participants' ability to remain committed to the church was often the result of participation in particular congregations within the denomination. R. Stephen Warner's paradigm of "de facto congregationalism" provided some insights about particular congregations who are LGBTQ affirming, while the United Methodist Church as a denomination has anti-gay statements in their official documents. The concept of de facto congregationalism provides a way to illuminate the differences within the denomination.

Finally, the participants revealed an unrelenting hope that the church would live up to its own word that God loves everyone and we are called to do the same. The hope that is evidenced in the narratives shared by the participants is brimming with hope and possibility, and this hope is underscored when read through an understanding that queerness itself is "primarily about futurity and hope."⁴⁵ José Esteban Muñoz states that queerness is always about the horizon, some future possibility, or in the case of this research, the *hope* of a future possibility where the church accepts, loves, and celebrates everyone. This hope in future possibilities includes the potential of the church expanding its understanding of God's creative imagination and love for all.

⁴⁵ Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

Muñoz looks to the past at LGBT movements to draw out what he calls utopian impulses. These utopian impulses are events or actions that deviate “from the...dominant mode of narration.”⁴⁶ In other words, utopian impulses do not conform to dominant cultural narratives, but work to expand the boundaries of our collective imaginations, and in the case of this project, expand the collective theological imagination. Muñoz states that the utopia in utopian impulses, “is not prescriptive,”⁴⁷ but is a blueprint of potentialities for a future that is not yet here. The queer horizon is not meant to offer a concrete alternative vision of a formalized future, but to clear the normalized dominant fog from our eyes so that an expanded vision can begin to materialize in the present and on the horizon. Muñoz hopes that his book is “an invitation...a call to think about our lives and times differently, to look beyond a narrow version of the here and now...[with] and insistence on something else, something better, something dawning.”⁴⁸ It is my hope that the research ahead will contribute to that something which is dawning, that is, a more inclusive church. There is a hope for a different kind of expansive future that abounds in the stories shared by the participants in this research. I believe there is something blooming on the horizon that is different than the past and present of the United Methodist Church’s understanding of sexuality. It is now that we turn to the United Methodist Church’s historical relationship pertaining to homosexuality in order to document what is happening in a broader context against which the narratives in this study are raised.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 189.

Chapter Four: United Methodist Church and Homosexuality

“We are not weeds; we are wheat! We are not weeds; we are wheat!” the crowd of LGBTQ people and allies chanted at the 2016 United Methodist Church General Conference.⁴⁹ The crowd adopted this phrase from a statement of apology that was prepared for the bishops to read in response to delegate Dorothee Benz being ruled out of order for using the term LGBTQ when she was speaking in favor of adopting Rule 44. This new rule, which was ultimately not adopted, would have changed the way legislation pertaining to LGBTQ people would have been handled. Supporters of LGBTQ inclusion believed Dorothee Benz and the movement for inclusion deserved an apology, and wrote a statement that was given to the bishops to read on the floor of General Conference, but this statement was rejected and it was not read to the conference. However, Dorothee Benz read the statement to the group of supporters gathered outside the conference.⁵⁰

The concerns of the people working for LGBTQ inclusion in the church revolve around the language used in statements about LGBTQ people in the church’s *Book of Discipline* (referred to as the *Discipline*), the exclusion of queer people in the life of

⁴⁹ Kathy L. Gilbert and Sam Hodges, "Delegates, supporters stand with LGBTQ people," *umc.org*, May 14, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/delegates-supporters-stand-with-lbgtq-people> (accessed May 14, 2016).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

ordained clergy ministry, and the prohibition against same-sex marriage. These statements are not found in the earliest writings of the *Discipline*, but were developed and added over the years as the church responded to the U.S. cultural developments.

Before the Restrictive Language

The Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church merged to form the United Methodist Church in the closing years of a tumultuous decade, 1968. This occurred in the midst of a culture that was awakening to diverse ways of being in the world. Second wave feminism, free love (and hippie) movement, and the rising awareness of the homosexual culture were contributing to an evolving understanding of ways of existing in the world. The decade birthed student-led protests against war, civil rights movements for African-Americans, second wave feminism, and gay liberation, which found its bearings in the civil rights model of protest and social change.⁵¹ Gay liberation groups had already begun forming in America as early as 1924; the first being the Chicago Society for Human Rights.⁵² In the midst of the McCarthy era, a group of gay men formed the gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles in 1950.⁵³ In 1955, a group originally founded as a social club for lesbians, Daughters of Bilitis, became the lesbian counterpart to the gay rights organization.⁵⁴ Leaders of these

⁵¹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 308-320.

⁵² Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 24.

⁵³ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 320.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

groups began to raise their voices against discrimination, and rally against policies and laws that supported discrimination and exclusion of gays and lesbians.

In addition to leaders of gay rights groups becoming more vocal, “[t]he collapse in the 1960s of strictures against the portrayal of sexual matters gave the media license to turn its attention to homosexuality.”⁵⁵ National magazines “printed photo essays of the gay subcultures,”⁵⁶ and so gay culture was brought to the attention of the American public. Therefore, when the protests and picketing began for equality and the court cases were argued, this movement gained the attention of the media, both print and television. Along with the growing recognition of gays and lesbians and the discrimination they faced in American society, a conversation began between the homophile movement’s leaders and liberal Protestant clergy.⁵⁷ One such meeting was held in San Francisco, California, organized by The Rev. Ted McIlvenna from the Glide Urban Center, “a private Methodist foundation in downtown San Francisco.”⁵⁸ Rev. McIlvenna organized the conference between the clergy and members from the gay community because he wanted to change the oppression and violence experienced by the gay community.⁵⁹ This conference, the Mill Valley Conference, which was supported by the Methodist church,

⁵⁵ Ibid, 319.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 320.

⁵⁸ ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, "California Digital Library," *Online Archive of California*, November 11, 2008, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt3000311n/> (accessed December 1, 2016).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

occurred May 31 to June 2, 1964 and included sixteen clergy members from various Protestant churches, including the Methodist church.⁶⁰

So it was in this evolving culture of social movements of gay liberation, the black power movement, women's liberation, the sexual revolution, and the hippie counterculture⁶¹ that the United Methodist was formed in 1968. The newly formed United Methodist Church did not ignore these cultural influences and social movements. At the first General Conference of the United Methodist Church held in 1968 in Dallas, Texas, a report was given about the 1966 World Family Life Conference held in Birmingham and London.⁶² This world conference was an outgrowth of the Methodist Church and its 1962 National Family Life Conference held in Chicago, with the belief that the social crisis was a worldwide experience due to the deterioration of the family and that the response should be an emphasis on promoting Christian family living. A future meeting was planned with the concern of restoring familial relations and the hope that this would avert further crises, including issues dealing with sex and sexuality.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 321.

⁶² The United Methodist Church, *1968 Journal of the Last Session of the General Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Last Session of the General Conference of The Methodist Church and Uniting Conference of The United Methodist Church and the General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, ed. Emerson D. Bragg, J. Wesley Hole and Charles D. White, Vol. 1 (Dallas: The United Methodist Church General Conference, 1968), 344-347.

⁶³ Ibid.

Sexuality was addressed in the 1968 General Conference's Committee No. 1 dealing with "Christian Social Concerns."⁶⁴ The following is quoted at length to facilitate an understanding of how issues addressing sexuality were brought together.

Under the heading "Sexuality," the General Conference stated:

Our society is undergoing a revolution in the area of sex and sexual morality. The prevailing shifting of standards presents both challenge and opportunity to the church.

We bring to this situation openness and encouragement to research in the biological, psycho-social and socio-cultural dimensions of human sexuality. The Christian community must bring also to the situation the theological dimension, thus casting it into the Biblical perspective of Creation. We view sexuality in the light of the goodness of this creation, believing it to be intended for the fulfillment of personality as well as for procreation, and further affirming that the sex act is never isolated within the separate personalities of participants or within their total relationship as persons. We believe that all dimensions of our sexuality are best satisfied within the marriage covenant.

We recognize that much of our program of sex education is ineffectual, and resolve to bring all resources available to us into study and development of new programs. We recognize that more important than formal sex education is the normal nurture of our children in Christian family environment.

We recognize that many persons who are troubled and broken by sexual problems, such as homosexuality, suffer from discriminatory practices arising from traditional attitudes and from outmoded legal practices. We strongly recommend that wherever possible such persons be brought under the care of our health and human development services rather than under penal and correctional services. We believe that the ministry of the Church extends to all human beings troubled and broken by sexual problems and they should find forgiveness and redemption within its fellowship.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ The United Methodist Church, *1968 Journal of the Last Session of the General Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Last Session of the General Conference of The Methodist Church and Uniting Conference of The United Methodist Church and the General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, ed. Emerson D. Bragg, J. Wesley Hole and Charles D. White, Vol. 2 (Dallas: The United Methodist Church General Conference, 1968), 1266.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1267-1268.

Even in the beginning days of the United Methodist Church, sex and sexuality were never outside of the church's purview, and equating same-sex relationships with sin, mental and physical illnesses continues to have lasting effects on the church and its adherents.⁶⁶ However, even with this negative view of lesbian and gay people, there was no initial record of a discussion surrounding the ordination of lesbian or gay people to lead the church.

The following year, in June 1969, the riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, would forever change gay rights activism. Not only did it bring the gay rights cause to the attention of larger society, but also the ensuing protests solidified gay rights social movements, bringing the issue more concretely into American society's field of focus.⁶⁷ Additionally, after Stonewall, gay liberation movements "turned 'coming out of the closet' from a personal, private decision into a political act and public strategy."⁶⁸ Being "out" signified a life lived openly and authentically, with pride replacing guilt and shame. However, the newly formed UMC would soon respond to these cultural developments.

Initial Period of Conflict

From the very outset of the United Methodist Church, there was evidence of competing responses regarding homosexuality and the ordination of lesbian and gay people. Even though the institutional church had created its unified statement on

⁶⁶ Faderman, *Gay Revolution*, 297. This was prior to the removal of "homosexuality per se" as a disorder from the *DSM-II*.

⁶⁷ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 319-320.

⁶⁸ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 25.

sexuality in the 1972 *Book of Discipline*, which included both the contested “incompatibility clause”⁶⁹ and the hopeful belief that all people were entitled to human and civil rights,⁷⁰ there were examples of variations in the responses to pastors coming out. For example, a Texas pastor was asked to resign when he came out, because he was now “unacceptable in the work of the ministry.”⁷¹ However, a few years later, a gay man maintained his appointment as pastor of a UMC in New York City after coming out.⁷² Additionally, in the same decade, a gay man was denied admission to Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary,⁷³ and two gay students at the same institution were denied graduation based on their sexual orientation.⁷⁴ Even though the denomination strove for a unified response and expanded its stance against the LGBT community by adding a ban on the giving of United Methodist funds to organizations that worked for gay rights⁷⁵ and

⁶⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1973), 86.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Religious Archives Network, *LGBT Religious Archives Network*, June 2, 2014, <https://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=236> (accessed 10 2017, January).

⁷² Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 28.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ The New York Times. “Expulsion of 2 Homosexual Students by Methodist Seminary Arouses Protest in Illinois.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 1978. August 8, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/06/04/archives/expulsion-of-2-homosexual-students-by-methodist-seminary-arouses.html>

⁷⁵ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1976* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1976), 337.

a statement against same-sex marriage,⁷⁶ the struggle for inclusion persisted. The institutional church also responded to the debate on sexuality by approving its first study on the Christian faith and human sexuality at the 1976 General Conference.⁷⁷ This would be the first of multiple studies issued throughout the history of the UMC, including 1980 and 1988.

The response by members and existing groups within the UMC was almost immediate. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to present day, groups were outspoken about their support for or against LGBT people. In addition, new political groups supporting one side or the other began to develop and continue to present day. Groups such as Good News, The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), UMAction, and the Confessing Movement support a conservative faction who believe they are defending traditional Christian beliefs and are faithfully carrying on a tradition started by John Wesley and working to maintain that LGBTQ people are sinful and incompatible with Christian teaching. The progressive groups working for full inclusion for the LGBTQ community include, Affirmation, Reconciling Ministries Network, and Love Prevails. As the institutional church worked through issues around sexuality, these groups became more vocal and more resolute in their beliefs.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 89.

⁷⁷ Ashley Boggan, "Connectional Table," *Amazon Web Services*, May 2015, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/connectional-table/documents/Human-sexuality-and-united-methodist-church-timeline.pdf (accessed November 20, 2016), 3.

Hardening the Positions

Events in the 1980s did not help to clarify, or unify, the UMC's stance on homosexuality. The 1980 General Conference included an opening Episcopal address in which Bishop W. McFerrin Stowe condemned homosexuality and the denomination voted to uphold the incompatibility clause.⁷⁸ Additionally, there was still no ban on the ordination of homosexuals.⁷⁹

However, in 1982, when a Denver bishop appointed an openly gay pastor and stated "publicly that he did not believe homosexuality to be a sin,"⁸⁰ some people took notice and filed charges against him. Following this uprising, the Judicial Council was asked if lesbian and gay people could be barred from ordination or lose their clergy credentials. The council ruled that lesbian and gay people were not automatically excluded, since the *Discipline* did not contain a statement that prohibited the ordination of lesbian and gay people.⁸¹ This led to the 1984 General Conference adding a statement prohibiting the ordination of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals,"⁸² and the phrase regarding human rights for all people, including homosexuals, was removed, thus solidifying the church's anti-gay stance and "opening the door to bringing official charges

⁷⁸ Ashley Boggan, "Connectional Table," 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 29.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1984* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1984).

against openly lesbian and gay clergy, and members of the church did bring charges against lesbian and gay pastors and clergy members who supported them.”⁸³

The decade closed with the 1988 General Conference maintaining the incompatibility clause, but adding, “we affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”⁸⁴ This appears to be an attempt to soften the language against gay and lesbian people. In addition, there was still language directly securing human rights for lesbian and gay people, but there was a blanket statement that affirmed “all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God,” and that the church “therefore work[s] toward societies in which each person’s value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened.”⁸⁵ It is difficult to tell if this includes “homosexual” people, since earlier in the *Discipline* the church clearly states that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Three actions by the denomination attempted to further solidify its stance on homosexuality in the 1990s. First, the 1992 General Conference received the Committee on the Study of Homosexuality’s report, but did not approve the report.⁸⁶ This meant that the committee’s majority report that called for the removal of statements condemning

⁸³ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 30.

⁸⁴ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1988* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), 96.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁶ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 32.

homosexuality from the *Discipline*⁸⁷ was declined and the committee's minority report to maintain the incompatible language was upheld. Second, was the addition of "self-avowed, practicing homosexual"⁸⁸ to clarify, or potentially muddy, the definition of who might be ordained in the church. Third, in a slightly more positive direction, a statement specifically mentioning the civil rights of homosexuals was added back into the *Discipline*,⁸⁹ and instead of homosexual, the *Discipline* used "sexual orientation" when referring to lesbian and gay people's civil rights.

However, even though the institutional church was making great strides continuing their condemnation of the LGBTQ community, there were still lay and clergy members working to change the church's stance. A group of fifteen bishops, known as the Denver 15, issued a letter in 1996 that acknowledged the hurt the church was causing to lesbian and gay people. This letter and the history of contestation and change in policy indicates that the UMC was, and is, not of one voice about homosexuality.

The Church Begins Responding to Cultural Changes

In the era of "don't ask, don't tell" in the 1990s, the church responded with a statement that urged the U.S. military to stop excluding people on the basis of their

⁸⁷ Ashley Boggan, "Connectional Table," *Amazon Web Services*, May 2015, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/connectional-table/documents/Human-sexuality-and-united-methodist-church-timeline.pdf (accessed November 20, 2016), 8.

⁸⁸ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1996* (Nashville: The United Methodist Church, 1996), 172.

⁸⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1992* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 92.

sexual orientation.⁹⁰ Additionally, same-sex marriage and whether or not pastors could perform these ceremonies entered the field of vision of the church. This led to the approval of a prohibition against same-sex unions at the 1996 General Conference and included in the 1996 *Book of Discipline*.⁹¹ However, this addition was in the Social Principles of the UMC which is not legally binding for the denomination.⁹²

The church remained discordant around gay and lesbian people, evidenced by a letter entitled, “In All Things Charity,” drafted by fifteen clergy members in response to the General Conference’s statement against performing same-sex unions. This letter made clear they did not stand in agreement with the prohibition of same-sex unions.⁹³ In 1999 a group of sixty-eight pastors from across the country, known as the “Sacramento 68,” participated in a lesbian couple’s union ceremony. The decision was made a year later not to bring the Sacramento 68 to trial.⁹⁴

Tensions around inclusion and same-sex marriage were heating up and reached its boiling point at the 2000 General Conference. On Wednesday May 10, 2000, more than 180 people were arrested outside the Cleveland Convention Center during an act of civil

⁹⁰ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 33.

⁹¹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1996* (Nashville: The United Methodist Church, 1996), 87.

⁹² Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁴ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 35.

disobedience protesting the church's stance regarding homosexuality.⁹⁵ The following day, Thursday May 11, 2000, after the conference reaffirmed its stances on issues around homosexuality, protests broke out and thirty people, including two bishops, were arrested and removed from the plenary floor.⁹⁶ Although the church would not change the language in the *Discipline*, they did deem it wise to add a statement that "implore[d] families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends."⁹⁷ The General Conference also passed "a resolution mandating continued dialogue about homosexuality, along with a requirement that candidates for ministry be willing to relate to people without regard to sexual orientation."⁹⁸ This could be viewed as progress, although little had changed.

After 2000, there was an increase in United Methodist news coverage of pastors coming out and charges being brought against them.⁹⁹ One of the early stories revealed the nuanced ways in which people interpreted restrictions in the *Discipline*. A gay pastor

⁹⁵ The United Methodist Church, *Running Summary Archive General Conference 2000* (Cleveland, May 12, 2000).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion*, 37.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Religion News Service, "Methodists say 'out' pastor may be removed," *The Christian Century*, November 14, 2001:13; Religion News Service, "UMC agency seeks change in gay stance," *The Christian Century*, April 19, 2003: 16-17; Religion News Service, "Lesbian minister to remain on leave," *The Christian Century*, June 15, 2004: 16; Religion News Service, "Methodist bishops: Gay clergy ban intact," *The Christian Century*, April 20, 2004: 10-11.

stated that his coming out “was meant to refer to his sexual orientation only”¹⁰⁰ and not his sexual behavior. His statement refers to the *Discipline’s* prohibition of “practicing” homosexuals and not simply being gay. Charges against him were dropped, and although members of his congregation supported him,¹⁰¹ there were others who believed the dismissal of charges was “going to be very hurtful because it is undermining the ministry of every other pastor in the Methodist Church who supports the *Book of Discipline*.”¹⁰² Although charges were dropped against him, there were other examples of people losing their clergy credentials.¹⁰³

The 2004 General Conference would create a new committee named the Connectional Table.¹⁰⁴ This new committee replaced the Council on Ministries and was

¹⁰⁰ The Christian Century, "Gay Methodist pastor retains his job," *The Christian Century*, June 19-26, 2002: 16.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Todd Hertz, "Gay United Methodist keeps job," *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002: 20.

¹⁰³ Religion News Service, "Trial set for lesbian Methodist pastor," *The Christian Century*, November 16, 2004: 15; Religion News Service, "Jury defrocks openly gay Methodist pastor," *The Christian Century*, December 28, 2004: 11-12; Religion News Service, "Lesbian minister to appeal her defrocking," *The Christian Century*, January 25, 2005: 14; Religion News Service, "Lesbian minister to appeal her defrocking," *The Christian Century*, January 25, 2005: 14; Religion News Service, "Lesbian reinstated; bishop to appeal case," *The Christian Century*, May 31, 2005: 17; Alan Cooperman, "Lesbian Minister Defrocked By United Methodist Church," *washingtonpost.com*, November 1, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/31/AR2005103100971.html> (accessed January 30, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ Linda Bloom, "Wrap-up: 2004 General Conference," *gc2004.org*, May 7, 2004, <http://gc2004.org/interior.asp?ptid=17&mid=4705> (accessed January 31, 2017).

designed to “coordinate the mission, ministries, and resources” of the church.¹⁰⁵ Also at the General Conference 2004, efforts to remove the “incompatible with Christian teaching” language were defeated and a tightening of the rules in *Discipline* would win out. Not only was the incompatibility language maintained in the social principles, but there was a clarification of language around sexuality and a list of chargeable offenses that could result in a church trial. This list included performing same-sex wedding ceremonies. On May 6, over 500 people gathered to protest these decisions, and although the protest was peaceful and their voices were heard, it would not change any of the decisions.¹⁰⁶

Another issue emerged for United Methodist Church in 2005 when a Virginia pastor refused membership to a gay man. The UMC’s Judicial Council ruled that pastors can deny membership to lesbian and gay people, and although the UMC’s Council of Bishops would unanimously oppose this ruling, the decision was upheld.¹⁰⁷ This decision

¹⁰⁵ The United Methodist Church, "Connectional Table in the Book of Discipline," *umc.org*, January 1, 2017, <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/connectional-table-in-the-book-of-discipline> (accessed February 6, 2017).

¹⁰⁶ Linda Bloom, "Wrap up: 2004 General Conference," *umc.org*, May 7, 2004, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/wrap-up-2004-general-conference> (accessed January 31, 2017); Ashley Boggan, "Connectional Table," *Amazon Web Services*, May 2015, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/connectional-table/documents/Human-sexuality-and-united-methodist-church-timeline.pdf (accessed November 20, 2016), 20; The United Methodist Church, General Conference 2004 *Video: Protest on the Floor*, May 6, 2004, <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference-2004-video-protest-on-the-floor> (accessed January 30, 2017).

¹⁰⁷ Kevin Eckstrom, "Methodist court says pastors may bar gays from membership," *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2005: 14; The Christian Century, "UMC bishops dispute church court ruling on gay membership," *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2005: 13; Religion News Service, "Methodist court upholds right to bar gays from membership," *The Christian Century*, December 12, 2006:16.

affected one of the participants in my study. Joshua was denied membership in a church because he was open to the pastor about his sexual orientation and the pastor said he would not be able to minister to Joshua.

The 2008 General Conference would again uphold all of the statements about sexuality, including the incompatible language, denial of ordination to gay and lesbians, and the right for pastors to deny membership to gays and lesbians. However, in a decision that was contrary to the church's anti-LGBTQ statements, the church decided not to pursue action against a transgender pastor from Baltimore, allowing Reverend Drew Phoenix to remain in good standing.¹⁰⁸

In the years after the 2008 General Conference, larger society's attitudes toward sexuality continued to shift, becoming more visible, partially signaled by the passage of the legalization of same-sex marriage in California. This cultural shift could also be seen in the opening of policies affirming people regardless of sexual orientation in the Episcopal Church (1994), the ELCA (2010), and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (2010).¹⁰⁹ Changing attitudes were also seen in the United Methodist Church as more clergy were visibly performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ TransFaith, "Rev. Drew Phoenix and The United Methodist Church," *transfaithonline.org*, January 1, 2017, http://www.transfaithonline.org/explore/christian/traditions/protestant/drew_umc/ (accessed February 6, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ HRC, *hrc.org*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-episcopal-church> (accessed September 25, 2018); HRC, *hrc.org*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-presbyterian-church-usa> (accessed September 25, 2018); HRC, *hrc.org*, January 1, 2018,

Perhaps the strongest indicator of changing attitudes was signaled through the lack of willingness by some of the high-ranking officials in the institutional church. There were instances of complaints and charges¹¹¹ pertaining to issues around sexuality brought against clergy, and the bishops were slow to respond to these charges. In addition to charges against clergy members for blessing same-sex unions in which the charges were dismissed or ignored, there was a particular example the Reconciling Ministries Network saw as a sign of hope in progress for full inclusion. This example involved charges of being a practicing homosexual against the Reverend Amy DeLong. Reverend DeLong was found not guilty, however this inspired her to form the group Love Prevails. Love Prevails formed with the intent of being a presence of inclusivity at the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida. However, the 2012 General Conference would dash any flames of hope these groups were trying to fan.¹¹²

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-evangelical-lutheran-church-in-america> (accessed September 25, 2018).

¹¹⁰ Religion News Service, "Retired UMC clergy offer to perform gay marriages," *The Christian Century*, August 12, 2008: 16; Religion News Service, "70 Minnesota UMC clergy would bless gay unions," *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2011: 15-16.

¹¹¹ The United Methodist Church has its own system of due process and therefore words such as charges, trials, and convicted are used when discussing complaints against members of the LGBTQ community and their allies.

¹¹² John Dart, "UMC bishops warned of clergy planning to bless gay unions," *The Christian Century*, October 18, 2011: 16; Heather Hahn, "Church trial of The Rev. Amy DeLong underway," *umc.org*, June 21, 2011, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/blogs-commentaries/post/church-trial-of-the-rev.-amy-delong-underway> (accessed January 1, 2017); Heather Hahn, "11:35 a.m., June 23: DeLong testifies in penalty phase," *umc.org*, June 23, 2011, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/blogs-commentaries/post/1135-a.m.-june-23-delong-testifies-in-penalty-phase> (accessed January 31, 2017); Heather Hahn, "Details of penalty for Rev. Amy DeLong," *umc.org*, June 23, 2011, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/details-of-penalty-for-rev.-amy-delong> (accessed

Two petitions specifically applicable to sexuality were defeated at the 2012 General Conference.¹¹³ The defeat of the petitions incited protestors at the conference causing the presiding bishop to close the afternoon session to the public.¹¹⁴ However, a petition calling for the end to guaranteed appointments was approved.¹¹⁵

Guaranteed appointments refer to the church's rule that when someone is ordained as an elder in full connection, the church has a place for them to serve.¹¹⁶ Guaranteed appointments add another dimension to the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the ministry of the church. The church and its congregants are not of one voice on the acceptance and inclusion of lesbian and gay people in general, and oppositional voices seem to be more amplified when discussions for inclusion of all people enter the sanctuary. This not only adds pressure on the church to find places for gay and lesbian people they ordain, but

January 31, 2017); Reconciling Ministries Network, "DeLong Trial Outcome Offers Hope for UMC," *rmnetwork.org*, June 24, 2011, <https://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/delong-trial-outcome-offers-hope-for-umc/> (accessed February 6, 2017); Steve Clunn, "The Trial of the Rev. Amy DeLong Sends Clear Message to UMC," *mfsaweb.org*, June 23, 2011, <http://mfsaweb.org/?p=5745> (accessed January 31, 2017); Love Prevails, "History of Love Prevails," *loveprevailsumc.com*, January 1, 2017, <https://loveprevailsumc.com/about/history-of-love-prevails/> (accessed February 7, 2017).

¹¹³ Religion News Service, "Methodists maintain gay policies," *The Christian Century*, May 30, 2012: 16-17.

¹¹⁴ Jay Voorhees and Kathy Noble, "Bishops close, reopen General Conference session," *umc.org*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/bishops-close-reopen-general-conference-session> (accessed February 6, 2017).

¹¹⁵ Rich Peck, "GC2012: General Conference wrap-up," *umc.org*, May 5, 2012, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/gc2012-general-conference-wrap-up> (accessed February 6, 2017).

¹¹⁶ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 264.

more importantly, has possible effects on the lives and ministries of lesbian and gay people if they are appointed in places where their legitimacy as pastoral leaders is not accepted. Ministry in this setting would be challenging, to say the least. Regardless, the judicial council ruled against the removal of guaranteed appointments, and the church remained firmly planted in its tradition of itinerancy and non-inclusion.

Even though the UMC was stalled in its efforts to be more inclusive, U.S. law was changing, catching up with changing cultural perceptions about sexual orientation. By 2014, all but fifteen states had legalized same-sex marriage, and on June 25, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that bans on same-sex marriages were unconstitutional, thus allowing couples in all fifty states to marry.¹¹⁷ Progressive UMC pastors were stepping up in their support of performing ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples and facing charges in the process.¹¹⁸ Some bishops continued to drop complaints brought against pastors for performing ceremonies for same-sex couples.¹¹⁹ A couple of participants in my study stated that complaints brought against them personally were looked over and ignored by the bishop. One participant believed it was ignored in order to avoid bad press. In one case, the bishop helped the congregants who brought the complaint against the pastor find another church, and the pastor remained at the church.

¹¹⁷ Pew Research Center, "Same-Sex Marriage, State by State," *pewforum.org*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/26/same-sex-marriage-state-by-state/> (accessed February 17, 2017).

¹¹⁸ Religion News Service, "Methodists' top court to consider defiant same-sex marriages," *The Christian Century*, October 16, 2013: 18-19; Renee K. Gadoua, "Methodist pastor faces penalty over gay weddings," *The Christian Century*, December 11, 2013: 13-14.

¹¹⁹ Renee K. Gadoua, "Bishop drops case on gay marriage," *The Christian Century*, April 2, 2014: 14.

Global Nature of the UMC

Although the American culture is shifting and many mainline Protestant churches are also evolving their own views on inclusion, working through issues of inclusion in the United Methodist Church is a global concern. The UMC is a connectional church and exists in a global context with Central Conferences outside the United States. The UMC believes that the mission of the church to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,”¹²⁰ is a global mission, and United Methodists “throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission.”¹²¹ Central Conferences were set up to help organize “the work of the Church outside the United States of America.”¹²² With almost 7.2 million members and participants, the continent of Africa is a major player in the United Methodist Church.¹²³ This is important to note, because the culture and views around human sexuality in the countries of Africa affect their contribution to the discussion on human sexuality. Homosexuality is illegal in thirty-eight countries in Africa¹²⁴ and is punishable by death in four African countries.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 93.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²³ United Methodist Church, "africa-central-conferences-statistics.pdf," *s3.amazonaws.com*, January 1, 2017, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/who-we-are/documents/africa-central-conferences-statistics.pdf (accessed February 7, 2017).

¹²⁴ Kathy L. Gilbert, "Coalition to Africa bishops: Let's talk," *umc.org*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/coalition-to-africa-bishops-lets-talk> (accessed May 9, 2016).

African delegates at the 2004 General Conference, stated that the church should not spend so much time discussing sin.¹²⁶ Other African delegates believed that homosexuality was “primarily an American concern,”¹²⁷ and a person from the Democratic Republic of the Congo commented that, “before Christians arrived, we practiced polygamy. The Christian teaching that we received taught that marriage should be between one man and one woman.”¹²⁸ In a video posted on the Reconciling Ministries Network, a delegate from Uganda at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, stated that conservative missionaries brought homophobia to Uganda, because homophobia did not exist prior to Christian missionaries.¹²⁹

The colonizing legacy of the church does, in fact, complicate the how the church engages in conversations around sexuality. The progressive contingent who is advocating for fuller inclusion in the church, does not want to replicate past colonial practices of telling other parts of the church what to do. One major issue to overcome will be how to

¹²⁵ Darla Cameron and Bonnie Berkowitz, “The State of Gay Rights Around the World,” *washingtonpost.com*, June 14, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/gay-rights/> (accessed February 6, 2017).

¹²⁶ Kathleen K. Rutledge, "Heart of Truthfulness," *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2004: 16.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Reconciling Ministries Network, “RMN General Conference Daily Download - May 14, *rmnetwork.org*, May 15, 2016, <https://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/general-conference-daily-download-may-14/> (accessed May 15, 2016).

promote fuller inclusion while honoring other cultures that are an important part of the church.

In order to better facilitate discussions in a global context, the “Executive of the Council of Bishops installed a Task Force on Human Sexuality, Gender and Race” in January 2014.¹³⁰ The task force developed seven core values that were supposed to guide fruitful discussions. In the following years leading up to the 2016 General Conference, the African College of Bishops issued “a statement on the state of global UMC and our common world,” urging the UMC to “an unreserved commitment to the Holy Bible as the primary authority for faith and practice in the church,”¹³¹ perhaps forgetting about the other three components of what is commonly referred to as the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Although scripture has been allotted primacy in the Book of Discipline, tradition, reason, and experience all contribute to establishing theological norms. The “Love Your Neighbor Coalition” responded in a letter that stated the points of disagreement, but also hoped it would open up ways for the varying groups to work together.¹³²

¹³⁰ United Methodist Church, "Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality, Gender and Race in a worldwide perspective," *s3.amazonaws.com*, January 19, 2016, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/Core_Values_Document_Final.pdf (accessed May 20, 2016).

¹³¹ College of Africa Bishops, "Africa College of Bishops' Meeting, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, Southern Africa A Statement on the state of global UMC adn our common world," *s3.amazonaws.com*, September 11, 2015, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/documents/africa-college-of-bishops-press-release.pdf (accessed may 9, 2016).

¹³² Kathy L. Gilbert, "Coalition to Africa bishops: Let's talk," *umc.org*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/coalition-to-africa-bishops-lets-talk> (accessed May 9, 2016).

Moving Forward

In addition to the already mentioned groups, there were other leaders attempting to find a way the whole church could work together to move forward in their discussions on homosexuality. In 2014, a proposal aptly called “A Way Forward,” was presented by two influential large church pastors, Adam Hamilton and Mike Slaughter which proposed moving the decision-making process regarding homosexuality to the local church level.¹³³ This would provide the freedom within the United Methodist Church so that the church could remain united, and avoid a schism because of the church’s exclusionary language in the *Discipline*.

In 2015, the UMC’s Connectional Table proposed a petition called “A Third Way.”¹³⁴ This petition would allow clergy to perform same-sex unions, remove

being a practicing homosexual or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies from the list of chargeable offenses for clergy...[and] removes the language that says the church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers it incompatible with Christian teachings, while recognizing this has historically been the position of the church.¹³⁵

This was created as a petition to be presented at the 2016 General Conference.

As the 2016 General Conference quickly approached, leaders worked to quell rumblings of a church split, while others were working to bring about change in the

¹³³ Adam Hamilton, "A Way Forward For A United Methodism," *adamhamilton.org*, June 5, 2014, http://www.adamhamilton.org/blog/a-way-forward-for-a-united-methodism/#.WJyPirYrI_U (accessed February 9, 2017).

¹³⁴ The Connectional Table, "The Connectional Table votes to submit legislation proposal to homosexuality," *umc.org*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/connectional-table-votes-to-submit-legislation-related-to-homosexuality> (accessed February 9, 2017).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

church. Many ordained clergy and clergy candidates came out as members of the LGBTQ community. On May 2, 2016, in a letter to the people of The United Methodist Church, fifteen clergy and clergy candidates came out as LGBTQ in the New York conference.¹³⁶ The following week, 111 LGBTQI clergy and clergy candidates came out in a “Love Letter to the United Methodist Church.” After the publication of the letter, more clergy and clergy candidates added their names bringing the number to 141.¹³⁷

Additionally, conferences were beginning to do what they believed to be the right thing to do in defiance of the church’s official stance. The New York Conference stated it would no longer consider sexual orientation when recommending people for ordination, and the Baltimore-Washington Conference’s board of ordained ministry recommended a married lesbian woman as a provisional deacon.¹³⁸

In addition, one pastor decided to marry his partner of 28 years, three days before the start of the 2016 General Conference on May 10. This was a strategic move on the couple’s part in hopes that the ceremony would “excite, engage and motivate others

¹³⁶ Kathy L. Gilber, "15 United Methodist clergy, candidates come out as gay," *umc.org*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/15-united-methodist-clergy-candidates-come-out-as-gay1> (accessed May 2, 2016).

¹³⁷ LGBTQI Clergy in The United Methodist Church, "111 LGBTQI Clergy and Candidates Come Out In Love Letter to The United Methodist Church," *rmnetwork.org*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/calledout/> (accessed May 9, 2016).

¹³⁸ Heather Hahn, "New York board welcomes gay clergy candidates," *umc.org*, March 1, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/new-york-board-welcomes-gay-clergy-candidates> (accessed May 12, 2016).

working for change,”¹³⁹ leading into the General Conference. LGBTQ people and their allies were making a clear statement to the church.

With over “100 pieces of legislation on human sexuality”¹⁴⁰ on the docket for the 2016 General Conference, some members had growing hopes things would move in the direction of inclusion, even if only slightly. However, these hopes would soon be dashed. The conference opened with reports of a New York pastor scheduled to participate in opening worship, who was asked to remove remarks welcoming LGBTQ people or she could not participate in the opening worship. She chose not to participate in opening worship, and instead participated in Love Prevails activities.¹⁴¹ Also, on opening day of the conference, Love Prevails helped organize a grassroots ordination ceremony (even if unofficial) for an out lesbian woman who was, and is, not welcome in the candidacy process.¹⁴² Although it seemed that the church was trying to keep controversies at bay, and possibly silenced, the voices for inclusion were determined to be, at the very least, visible.

¹³⁹ JoAnne Viviano, "United Methodist minister and partner marry in defiance of church," *dispatch.com*, May 7, 2016, <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/05/07/couple-marries-in-defiance-of-church.html> (accessed May 7, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Kathy L. Gilbert, "GC2016 tackling 44-year stance on homosexuality," *umc.org*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/gc2016-tackling-44-year-stance-on-homosexuality> (accessed April 27, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Barbara Dunlap-Berg, "General Conference 2016 officially begins," *umc.org*, May 10, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/general-conference-2016-officially-begins> (accessed May 10, 2016).

¹⁴² Kathy L. Gilbert, "Grassroots group declares lesbian ordained," *umc.org*, May 10, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/grass-roots-group-declares-lesbian-ordained> (accessed May 10, 2016).

The 2016 General Conference was not moving ahead with discussions that revolved around sexuality. Since there seemed to be no movement in the discussions, the conference asked the bishops to lead the conference forward. The bishops suggested that they be allowed to name a special commission to work through how the church could move forward as a united church. The delegates at the General Conference supported the bishops' decision, and the UMC managed to not make any decisions to change existing policies that embodied discrimination.

After General Conference, U.S. jurisdictional conferences began making their own decisions about how they would operate within the institutional church. In July, the Western Jurisdictional Conference elected the first openly gay bishop, Bishop Karen Oliveto.¹⁴³ The South Central Jurisdiction filed a petition to the Judicial Council to declare if this election is legal. The Judicial Council addressed the petition in the spring of 2017 and Bishop Oliveto remains in her position.¹⁴⁴

Taking a different approach, the South Central Conference, which includes the Great Plains annual conference, witnessed its bishop bring charges against Cynthia Meyer who came out to her congregation in January of 2016.¹⁴⁵ The annual conference

¹⁴³ Kathy L. Gilbert, "Western Jurisdiction elects openly gay United Methodist bishop," *umc.org*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/western-jurisdiction-elects-openly-gay-united-methodist-bishop> (accessed July 15, 2016).

¹⁴⁴ Linda Bloom, "Top Court will take up Oliveto election in spring," *umc.org*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/top-court-will-take-up-oliveto-election-in-spring> (accessed August 22, 2016).

¹⁴⁵ Heather Hahn, "Complaint filed against Kansas pastor who came out during sermon," *umc.org*, January 5, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/kansas-pastor-comes-out-during-sermon> (accessed August 21, 2016).

followed through on the charges brought against her, and Meyer left her church at the end of August 2016. She is now serving in the United Church of Christ.¹⁴⁶ The United Methodist Church in the United States is not of one voice when it comes to the acceptance of LGBTQ people. The opinion a particular conference upholds often falls in line with overall political leanings of that region. Therefore, it is no surprise not all conferences are following the Great Plains' example. Some conferences are stepping up and declaring their openness for accepting queer people into ordained ministry (for example the New York Conference).

The events prior to the 2016 General Conference were happening as I was conducting the interviews with my participants. By the time the love letter to the church was released, I had conducted all but two of the interviews. Some of the study's participants signed the letter, coming out to the denomination. All of the interviews, except one, were completed by the time of General Conference in Oregon. The impending General Conference was on the minds of the participants, and there was actually some positive energy around potential movement toward a more inclusive church. However, the General Conference did not result in any changes, except exacerbating the feelings on either side of the debate. It seemed there was a rise in charges of "being a self-avowed practicing homosexual"¹⁴⁷ lodged against people, specifically those who signed the love letter to the church. My final participant who I

¹⁴⁶ Anthony Moujaes, "Kansas lesbian pastor finding a home in the UCC," *ucc.org*, 1 2017, February, http://www.ucc.org/news_kansas_lesbian_pastor_finding_a_home_in_the_ucc_02012017 (accessed 1 2017, February).

¹⁴⁷ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 788.

interviewed after the General Conference revealed in the interview that he had charges against him, and was not sure how things looked for him moving forward. As the church moves forward in its purpose and mission, my hope is that the church realizes this is not simply a debate about an issue, but a conversation about human beings who are scripturally compatible and divinely called.

Chapter Five: “Loved and Called by God”

“God’s call to you has been there from the very beginning of your life; it is transformed by the waters of your baptism; it continues to take shape throughout your life.”

(¶ 220, *The Book of Discipline, The United Methodist Church*)

“I was deeply formed in this idea that I am beloved of God; there is nothing else to do, but just be loved,” stated one participant. “I am more than just a gay person. I’m also a gifted and called clergyperson,” stated another participant. Still another participant shared that “I never thought of myself as a gay person, I thought of myself as a person being called to ministry.” Being loved and called by God was a theme in all the interviews conducted. The interviews were conducted beginning with an open-ended question asking the participant to share their spiritual journey. This way of opening the interviews was informed by the knowledge that, typically, ordained clergy have written a spiritual autobiography and this would open up the conversation for further inquiry.

For everyone entering the candidacy process for ordination in the United Methodist Church, one of the requirements is to write a spiritual autobiography. Not only does the spiritual autobiography allow the author to “better appreciate their own lives and comprehend God’s presence throughout their lifetimes,”¹⁴⁸ but also, the practice of

¹⁴⁸ William B. Randolph, "resources/tell-me-your-story-how-to-write-your-spiritual-memoir," www.umcdiscipleship.org, January 1, 2018, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/tell-me-your-story-how-to-write-your-spiritual-memoir> (accessed October 23, 2018).

writing a spiritual autobiography provides an opportunity for the individual to explore their life's journey through the lens of being called by God to serve the world through leadership in the church. The written narrative of one's journey allows the individual to connect the dots of events in their lives in the light of God's call.

The Candidacy Guidebook for the United Methodist Church (UMC) reminds the reader that the idea of "call" is connected with vocation, "from the Latin *vocare*, which means 'to name' or 'call'."¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, "a calling is a deep sense that [one's] very being is implicated in what [one does]."¹⁵⁰ A calling into ministry in the church is necessarily connected to the mission of the church, and the UMC's understanding of the church's mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace."¹⁵¹ The act of being called is informed by the Biblical act of Jesus' baptism and God's public declaration of Jesus' blessing, anointing, and commissioning.¹⁵² As a member in the United Methodist Church, "when we are baptized, we are called into ministry on behalf of Christ...that 'through baptism, (we) are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation and...our lives on this earth are to be visible extensions of

¹⁴⁹ The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, *Answering the Call: Candidacy Guidebook* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 57.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Moore, *A Life at Work: The Joy of Discovering What You Were Born To Do* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 24.

¹⁵¹ The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, *The Christian as Minister*, ed. Meg Lassiat (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2013), 8.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

the life and ministry of Jesus.”¹⁵³ In other words, through the act of baptism, whether infant baptism or baptism later in life, we are incorporated into God’s commission, love, and blessing, even before we might understand and respond to God’s call on our lives. It is in reference to baptism that we begin to understand who we are as beloved people of God.

The participants shared in various ways the feeling of being loved by God. Kevin credited his grandparents, Sunday school, and worship in church as “instrumental in forming my understanding that all people were created by God and that all people are loved by God.” This included his whole self. Lisa shared that she “always felt loved by God...(including) at church.” These participants had childhood in the church that reassured them of God’s love.

However, Josh’s experience of assurance of God’s love was different from Kevin and Lisa. Josh grew up in the church in the south and went to college in the south. He was very involved with campus ministry all while knowing he was attracted to men. He shared that he “spent a lot of time trying to pray about it and at one point, the campus minister and I met and talked about it and we talked about this is something I have to struggle with and I can’t accept, and that we are called to persevere...I would never call myself gay because I can’t accept that identity. That would be just a terrible thing.” He continued struggling with his sexuality for two more years until finally he reached a breaking point. He prayed, “God I can’t do this anymore and I don’t know if it is right or wrong, but I am not going to fight this anymore.” Continuing in his words, “in this deep spiritual moment, I heard the voice of God say that is okay, I love you anyway.” He

¹⁵³ Ibid., 9-10.

believes that it could have only been the voice of God, because accepting his sexuality was not where he was in his own personal thoughts. Josh knew at that moment he was loved by God.

One other participant shared a moment when they felt deeply loved by God. Michael named a “converting moment” that happened after communion at camp when he was alone on his bunk, reading the Bible and praying, that he “discovered that in all of my brokenness and aloneness and questions (about sexuality) that I was profoundly and deeply loved still.” The other participants understood they were loved by God, but did not name a particular event in which they were made keenly aware of God’s love. However, Robert said that because of his understanding that God loved him reassured him in God’s call on his life. Robert believed that “God knew exactly what God was calling into ministry, my whole self.”

Multiple factors, such as, personal, social, institutional, cultural and religious factors,¹⁵⁴ are found in conversion narratives, and the spiritual autobiography required in the UMC bears some similar features to conversion narratives. Although the conversion may include an experience of accepting Jesus as one’s personal savior, I am using conversion in the sense of one coming to an understanding of being called by God into ministry, which is a new way of viewing one’s life. This new understanding of one’s purpose in life is a converting experience because it “changes one’s self-image,”¹⁵⁵ and when the person recounts their life events, like people who have undergone a conversion

¹⁵⁴ Henri Gooren, "Conversion Narratives," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

experience, they “literally reconstruct their lives, giving new meanings to old events and putting different emphases in the bigger ‘plot’ of their life stories.”¹⁵⁶ For example, Robert shared in his story that “I never recognized from the very beginning of, ‘what do I want to be when I grow up’, and I knew it was a chef in my own restaurant, what I didn’t realize was that I was sort of wired to nourish people.” With the new understanding of being called by God into ministry, he realized that he was called to nourish souls with “God’s message of love and hope.”

Robert’s new insight into his former desire, or vision, for his life is just an episode from his entire narrative in which he “establishes a believable identity...in the form of ‘an integrated continuous personality which transcends the limitations and irregularities of time and space and unites all of his/her apparently contradictory experiences into an identifiable whole’.”¹⁵⁷ It is his attempt to “make sense of [his] experiences, bring clarity to [his] perceptions, and provide meaning to [his] life situations.”¹⁵⁸ This extends beyond Robert. This is what writers of a spiritual autobiography are attempting to do. They are creating a narrative that connects their experiences and makes sense of God’s call on their lives not only in the context of self-realization, but also in the context of a specific community. In a study on Eastern Orthodox conversion narratives, Daniel Winchester notes that converts’ narratives are “retrospective reconstructions that are patterned by and

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Charles J.G. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1990: 152-163, 152.

¹⁵⁸ Cynthia N. Kimball, Kaye V. Cook, Chris J. Boyatzis and Kathleen C. Leonard, "Meaning Making in Emerging Adults' Faith Narratives: Identity, Attachment, and Religious Orientation," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 2013: 221-233, 221.

help reproduce the larger religious groups' theological presuppositions and norms about what constitutes an experience of conversion."¹⁵⁹ In the case of the UMC candidacy process, writers of spiritual autobiographies are placing themselves in a normative narrative in which they desire to be recognized as individuals who are called to ministry.

Therefore, in addition to the benefits of self-understanding, the spiritual autobiography lends itself as an introduction to the members of the Board of Ordained Ministry (BOM). The spiritual autobiography is written in the hopes of placing the individual in a field of recognition of one who is called by God. This is only one piece of the candidacy process, but is still an important piece that contributes to the recognition of an individual's call to ministry by the Board of Ordained Ministry (BOM).

When an individual desires to enter the candidacy process, it is at this time that the individual seeks to make her/himself recognizable in the context of what has been established as the moral norms for a ministerial candidate. Just as the person seeks to establish oneself in relationship with the community of the church, they are establishing themselves in relation to the moral norms. In this sense, the writer of the spiritual autobiography begins a story of the self, and in the words of Judith Butler, "in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account...[thus becoming] self-narrating beings."¹⁶⁰ In other words, the writer attempts to narrate a story of the self to be recognized by the other, that in this case are the members of the Board of Ordained Ministry. The creation

¹⁵⁹ Daniel Winchester, "Converting to Continuity: Temporality and Self in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2015: 439-460, 441.

¹⁶⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 11.

of one's own story is a social act because it occurs not in isolation, but in the presence of others, that is, a social act. Butler states that

an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself. Moreover, the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told.¹⁶¹

Because the terms by which one gives an account are not terms one created, the person is writing oneself into the story that is already there. The terms employed and the story in which one desires to be included, informs where the formation of a self begins. By this, it is meant that the person creating the autobiography does not remember everything about one's own story, but starts at what they believe to be the first memory that has the potential to be intelligible by the other to whom we are sharing the information.

For this reason, the interview participants' stories often began with their earliest memories of being in church or part of a religious group. Michael's autobiography began by recounting his early years as a member of the Quaker community. Michael shared that, "I grew up Quaker...[and] one aspect of the Quaker theology that was deeply imprinted on me [was] that every person is beloved of God. And every person has the Divine Light in them. That every person has a spirit-led moment to share in community."

All of the participants referenced church or being part of a religious organization as part of their childhood. The religious organization was not always United Methodist. These ranged from Christian Science to Evangelical United Brethren (although the EUB

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

joined with the Methodist church to form the United Methodist Church) to Presbyterian.

Only one of the participants stated that although they attended church regularly as a child, it was not particularly “faith forming.” These descriptions of the participants’ own childhood places them in the fields of knowledge and recognition in which others can identify.

Childhood participation in a recognized religious organization typically includes events such as baptism, Sunday school, and participation in worship activities. Robert’s statement that he did not experience his Presbyterian childhood as particularly faith forming does not negate his infant baptism and incorporation into God’s community. Lisa’s childhood experiences in the Christian Science Church coincided with her experiences in the United Methodist Church. Lisa’s mother belonged to the Christian Science Church while her father and his extended family belonged to the United Methodist Church. Although her religious upbringing contains different brushstrokes, there are still the signposts of being part of a Christian community.

Other signposts marking one’s belonging in the continuous narrative of Christian community include other family members relation to the church and various social activities and relations that create an individual’s context in which their spiritual development occurs. Mary’s inclusion that her father was an EUB pastor and Lisa’s sharing that her grandparents were “very involved lay leaders” in the United Methodist Church beyond the local church demonstrates their own historical connection to the church. Stories related to youth group and campus ministries, illuminate the continuous religious development and spiritual awakening in relationship with God. These events not only assist in the recognition of the individuals in a particular Christian narrative, but

also, these events provide the foundation for the participants' understanding of their call, thus the spiritual autobiography is the person's call story.

In various ways, the participants came to the understanding that they were created, loved, and called by God. God was present for all people, including themselves. As Michael stated, "all people are... a breath of God's life in this world." Living into these words, the participants also felt called to the ministry of God through the church. All the participants, with their unique stories, share a common theme of a strong pull within themselves to serve God in some way.

In an effort to be recognized as a person called into ministry, the participants reflect on their life through a spiritual lens, articulating the narrative arcs (e.g. epiphanic moments) in terminology "not of our making."¹⁶² This is not to say that the call stories or one's spiritual autobiography is not unique to the individual, but the story is using already established language and narratives that allow the person to be recognized in the particular context. This recognition by the other brings the narrator into what Judith Butler refers to as the sphere of normativity.¹⁶³ Butler states that there is ethical violence that occurs when a person begins to produce a narrative about oneself. The violence occurs, because there are parts of one's life that remain disassociated from the narrative coherence one is trying to convey.¹⁶⁴ Although lesbian and gay clergy are forced by the statement in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* to leave out certain aspects of their

¹⁶² Ibid., 21.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

whole self, that is, where “self-summarization fails,”¹⁶⁵ it is clear that the participants in this study see themselves as far more than simply lesbian or gay. That is not to say their sexuality is not an important part of who they are, or is a factor in their spiritual journey, but in order to make their way into the field of intelligibility they must leave out those things that strike a chord of incoherence.

It is this omission of one’s sexuality that contributes to the violence of self-narration. For a definition of violence, I follow Parker Palmer’s definition of violence as, “any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of another person.”¹⁶⁶ In other words, the church’s defiance in recognizing lesbian and gay people as viable candidates for ordained ministry, requires lesbian and gay people to omit a portion of their identity, dishonoring their whole being, which in turn, calls into question their authenticity.

John Neafsey states that, “genuine callings are grounded in a sense of personal authenticity, in the God’s honest truth of who we are. The call to authenticity is about *knowing* ourselves and *being* ourselves.”¹⁶⁷ The discovering and “knowing” of one’s self is accomplished by exploring the web of social relations and contexts in which we find ourselves,¹⁶⁸ in this case, the writing of a spiritual autobiography. By omitting specific details that relate to one’s sexuality, the event or experience loses its truest power of revelation.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 169.

¹⁶⁷ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice*, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 52.

For example, in his spiritual autobiography, Robert wrote that he was working as a funeral director and embalmer when he began attending a United Methodist Church with his two aunts. However, the “most honest version” was that it was his aunt and her partner that invited him to the church. Robert had not been attending church, but he decided to go when his aunt who was a lesbian invited him. It was while attending the church that he began to feel called to ministry. However, he had been taught “gay and ministry don’t go together.” The true story changes Robert’s experience in the church. It provides the beginning of his own reconciliation with his sexuality, the church, and his call to ministry.

Mary’s story of growing up as a preacher’s kid and feeling called to ministry in high school but ignoring it, and then hearing “God calling and saying I want you to go to seminary and be a minister” during her freshmen year of college, which she did after she finished her degree in elementary education sounds like many call stories. The story of hearing a call and ignoring the call is a common trope in call stories. However, knowing that Mary is a lesbian provides a truer picture of the whole person God is calling, and potentially widening the normative frame in the understanding of whom God calls into ministry.

Michael’s converting moment where he “discovered that in all my brokenness and aloneness and questions that I was profoundly and deeply loved still,” sounds familiar in a call story. Later in life he had another moment when “I felt rotten about my dual life I was living...and prayed to God, and in a very mystical kind of moment, I got a very clear message and feeling of being wrapped in a cloth and...warmness just poured over me and a very clear message, you are not trash and you are not anything you think you are in

terms of badness, you are loved.” These epiphanic moments reveal a deeper truth when understood in light of Michael’s sexuality and that he “felt like trash” because of his desire for other men and God revealed to him that his “sexuality is not garbage.”

In a similar fashion, Josh’s experience of having a “really deep spiritual moment (where) I heard the voice of God say that is okay, I love you anyway,” is more profound than simply feeling unworthy as a person. The unworthiness was rooted in his sexuality and having been taught by the church that same sex attraction was sinful. Believing that God loved him as a gay man allowed for his own reconciliation with the church. Likewise, for Kevin, the church’s teaching about the sinfulness of same-sex attraction was the reason why he stopped attending church when he was about thirteen. He was out about his sexuality and was supported by his family and friends. However, he “understood that the church may not love me, and I couldn’t reconcile the church’s stance versus what I believed about God, which was love of all people.” Kevin was not able to name the reason he “stepped away from church,” around thirteen, and by not naming the specific reason, the story and the author was recognized as a story of straying away from the church and ultimately returning. What was lost in the narrative was the fact that Kevin ultimately returned to the church and discovered his call, because he was invited to a church that accepted and celebrated *everyone*.

Because of the church’s exclusionary rules, the participants sacrifice revealing true selves in an effort to be recognized as viable candidates for ministry. What is missing in the autobiographies, then, is “the true self...rooted in the experience of the primary, undistorted, spontaneous, moment-to-moment unfolding of our own inner

emotional reality.”¹⁶⁹ The narratives describe recognizable events in which God’s action, guidance, and redemptive power are manifested in the authors’ experiences, but what is lost is the degree to which, and to whom, the spiritual transformation occurs. These stories are unable to reveal the person’s *whole* self, therefore causing violence by not honoring the person’s identity, integrity, and soul. The ability to name one’s sexuality and identity is crucial for providing evidence of God’s Spirit working in the lives of lesbian and gay people and in the life of the church. The ability to name one’s sexuality and identity lends itself to personal authenticity and to knowing one’s deepest calling.

By leaving out references that might indicate their sexuality, the participants are risking authenticity. However, the participants believe they are answering to a higher calling, one that is beyond the current church beliefs and rules. Robert stated, “God knew exactly what God was calling into ministry. My whole self.” Because some of his first experiences of the UMC “were from some LGBT clergy people who made sure I understood that there was a place for me, that I belonged to the church,” he feels called to provide the same experience. All of the participants in this study referenced some person, or group of people, who helped them in their journey of redeeming their sexuality with their faith and reconciling with the church, which influenced how they understood their call.

The participants viewed themselves as called by God, to be in service with people, and be an example of a lesbian or gay person in leadership of the church. This understanding follows Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of deputyship. Bonhoeffer’s concept of deputyship is anchored to the idea that “life is bound to [humanity] and to God

¹⁶⁹ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice*, 54.

and a [person's] life is free."¹⁷⁰ It is this bond and freedom that leads to a responsible life. Deputyship is when a person is "directly obliged to act in the place of other [people]."¹⁷¹ Bonhoeffer continues, "Jesus...lived in deputyship for us as the incarnate Son of God, and that is why through Him all human life is in essence a life of deputyship...Jesus was not the individual, desiring to achieve a perfection of his own,"¹⁷² but lived for humanity. Jesus is the ultimate example of deputyship and the responsible life. Jesus provides the example that we do not live as individuals and in isolation, but in community and in relationship to all humanity.

In the case of the participants for this study, the relationship, or bond, with God was exemplified in their call stories in which they demonstrated how God was working in their lives. The relationship with God was also evidenced in the participants unwavering understanding of God's love for them. The relationship between God and the individual participants developed as the participants responded, or did not immediately respond, to God's nudging or direction through their journeys.

The bond with humanity, or community, is evidenced in the people who helped guide the participants on their journey. These relationships assisted in the return of some participants to church, a deeper understanding of God's love for them, and for the realization and response to God's call on their lives. The interactions of the relationships not only affected the participants in ways that led them to a deeper commitment to their calling, but also affected the way in which they live their calling presently.

¹⁷⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), 220.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 222.

Robert stated that his lesbian aunts invited him to their UMC church and that “some of my first experiences of the United Methodist Church as an adult were from some LBGT clergy people,” and that when they assured him there was a place for him, “I believed it, when they said it to me, I believed it, I felt it, I experienced it.” He also shared that when he began to feel restless in his career as a funeral director and asked a friend what she thought he should do, she replied, “you are going to be a minister.” These episodes in his life were formative for his call and for his sense of deputyship.

Michael experienced assurances from events and people around him as well. When he felt his call and decided to attend seminary, he chose a school to attend and later found out that the school had “an incident of a seminarian publishing a newsletter about being gay and being called and for me it confirmed that is where I should go.” Michael, through “however the Divine Spirit works to make these moments happen,” found a community that allowed him to explore a calling without denying his sexuality.

All of other the participants as well, Lisa, Josh, Mary, Don, and Kevin, found themselves in circles of relationships that helped them explore God’s call on their lives without denying their sexuality. Lisa shared that she “really had the most ideal support of any gay candidate for ministry. It was charmed...it was led by God, I really do believe.”

These relationships were foundational to the participants’ ability to live into their call authentically and maintain a level of personal integrity. The participants were out about their sexuality to the people in their immediate circles of support. Through these relationships, they learned how to speak about themselves without saying, in Michael’s words, “psst, psst, by the way I am gay.” Michael said that he talked about what was important and of value to me, for example, God loves everyone and everyone is included

into God's family. Michael shared that he "did all kinds of gay things now that I look back on it. I had art and I had music that I inserted into my paperwork." In addition, five of the participants commented that when they were ordained, they made sure that everyone who laid hands on them for prayer, knew they were lesbian or gay. This allowed them to live out their call, their truth, with integrity.

The participants truly believe they are responding to a higher caller than just the denomination. Lisa stated that, "I felt like I was being true to my call and I was answering to a higher authority than the United Methodist Church and [the policies of the church] could not be a stumbling block in my way." The sentiment of answering to a higher authority was echoed throughout the various interviews. The participants, through a bond with God and relationships with other people, discovered their call and lived out this call with integrity. The policies of the church require these participants to live into a gray space of reframing and disclosure that risk the participants' authenticity. However, the belief that they are answering to a higher authority for life-giving purposes affirms the liminal spaces they occupy.

The concept of deputyship sheds some light onto the reasons the participants are willing to live in a gray space. The participants feel called to, in the words of Kevin, "articulate that God is present for all people." Kevin's awareness that the church has "done harm to many LGBT persons and family member of LGBT persons" and it "inspires me to live [my ministry] out more boldly and to be more intentional about actions and words." In these words there is the desire to be an example of God's love for the world. There are times when it is important to hear that God's love is open to everyone from an actual lesbian or gay person in leadership at the church. For Mary,

being an example of God's love involved working with the local AIDS coalition in the late 1980s to develop and deliver a program about AIDS for schools. Her involvement did raise "concerns" and she was eventually moved from the conservative area, but she led by example. Sometimes the example is just being present as a lesbian or gay person in a leadership position.

Another aspect of the calls for many participants in the group involved the desire for the church to live into God's love. Robert believes part of his call is to help "hold the church accountable to her word." His understanding of the church's word is that God loves all people and that all people are welcome. Kevin understands part of his call to help lead the church to accept all people and stated, "you can't change a thing if you leave a thing," and continued, following the concept of deputyship, "and you also can't be purposeful in the lives of others if you don't and if you aren't willing to make some degree of sacrifice...as Christians we are called to a sacrificial life of love."

This chapter discussed the participants' understanding of being loved and called by God. The policies of the United Methodist Church, specifically, that a "practicing homosexual" should not be ordained, demands that lesbian and gay people leave out key factors that contribute to their call story. Following Palmer's definition of violence, I argued that this causes violence to the participants because it does not honor their identity or soul. However, the discretion involved in what one chose to reveal is read in light of Bonhoeffer's concept of deputyship, and understood as a sacrifice in the service of the larger community. This is not the only negotiation required of lesbian and gay ordained clergy and the next chapter discusses how lesbian and gay clergy further negotiate the institutional church.

Chapter Six: Ways of Negotiating

It is clear that the participants in the study understand themselves to be loved by God, a part of God's family, and God's authority was much greater than the church's authority. They also have an understanding that they are called into ministry and that this ministry is within an institutional church that states they are incompatible with Christian teaching and homosexuality is a sin. Still, in the midst of this firestorm of exclusionary language and tactics, participants choose to enter into the United Methodist Church (UMC) institution to live out their call to ministry. Entering the UMC's field of ministry requires constant negotiation of identity, space, and power between lesbian and gay clergy and the authority of the church, and also negotiating relationships with lay members of the community. The second theme that emerged from the interviews reveals the ways in which the participants negotiate the institution, and these methods of negotiation found in the interviews fall into four sub-themes.

Selective in Coming Out as a Way of Negotiating

Negotiating the terrain of the United Methodist Church is evidenced early on in the ordination process, because of the requirement of writing a spiritual autobiography. Those who wish to be ordained do not write openly about their sexuality. Although sexuality does not constitute the entirety of one's own personhood, sexuality is, or might be, an integral part to their spiritual journey. Gay and lesbian people enter into the candidacy process in the closet, and as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, "there are

remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them.”¹⁷³ In other words, a person who is lesbian or gay is always negotiating the parameters of the closet, and this negotiating becomes a dominant social feature that shapes and informs their ways of being and doing in the world.

For example, Michael stated that he was one hundred percent out, however, he still carefully negotiated the way he existed in the church. Michael’s journey began by coming out to the chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry and followed through with only having people who knew he was gay laying hands on him at the ordination ceremony, because in Michael’s words, “I wanted to be faithful.” Michael was creating a new, wider space to exist in the diminishing expanses of creation in the United Methodist Church. After being ordained, Michael made a point of coming out to a few district superintendents and to the senior pastor at his first appointed church. Michael was strategic about to whom he shared the information. He chose people that he believed could “hurt him.” By people who could hurt him, I am referring to people with the power to decide his future role as a minister in the church including maintaining his credentials as an elder in the UMC.

A few of the other interview participants shared this same sentiment. The participants would come out to the senior pastors at their respective churches, and then maybe come out to another leader in the church, opening the closet door and inviting the people in positions of power to share the space of the closet, thus bringing the people in

¹⁷³ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67-68.

power into a relation of knowing about the thing that these people in positions of power may have been previously able to ignore, disregard, or claim ignorance on the subject.

Mary invited the “knowing” by “disclosing everything” about her sexuality in her ordination paperwork. She was ordained prior to the strict language against the ordaining of homosexuals was added to the *Book of Discipline* and it did not stand in her way of ordination. However, Mary stated in the interview that she did not broadcast her sexuality, “but [tries] to be faithful to the gay community.” Mary voiced a common concern that was found with all the participants, and that is one of trying to be true to themselves and their calling, and still, as Mary stated, “I don’t need to be placing stumbling stones in front of people to be able to receive faith in God.” Mary felt that coming out might turn some people away from the church. Robert stated this sentiment a little differently, in that he felt “that coming out would do damage to the morale of the congregation.” He did not want to be the person that caused division in the congregation. Robert also stated that he would come out if he thought it would be a benefit to others. The participants understood themselves to be answering a call to ministry that required them to, as Kevin stated, “willing[ly] walk that fine line between being true to myself but also accepting the very narrow path the United Methodist Church offered to me.”

They are able to walk this fine line because nearly every participant stated that they do not feel the need to tell everyone about their sexuality, that is, they are negotiating the space of the closet and maintaining the power of knowing and unknowing. However, none of the participants are interested in completely hiding their sexuality. Lisa stated that if she were to completely hide every aspect of her life, it would

leave her “emotionally poor,” and so it is important for her to share in places she understands to be safe spaces.

In a similar fashion, Mary travels the narrow line of her community knowing and unknowing about her sexuality. Mary believes that she benefits from sexism, because no one says anything about her living with her partner. The two of them live in a rural area and are always together in public. Mary believes that a lot of people in the town think that it is “nice that two women do not have to live alone and can help each other.” She acknowledges that some people know they are lesbians, especially “those that want to know,” but there are those people in the community that hold the belief that two women should not, or do not have to, be alone, is enough “knowing” for them. In this example, people are making assumptions about Mary and her partner, even in Mary’s silence.

Sedgwick notes in her book that, “silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet.”¹⁷⁴ In addition, she points out that this fact about silence is dependant on “the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge.”¹⁷⁵ In other words, there is a power negotiation occurring in the fields of knowing and not knowing. It becomes a power play of who knows and holds the information. Sedgwick uses as an example of a 1973 case, in which an earth science teacher Maryland was denied a new teaching contract, “not because he had disclosed too much about his homosexuality, but quite the opposite, that he had not disclosed

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

enough,”¹⁷⁶ to demonstrate the complexities of silence and knowing and unknowing in relation to the politics of the closet. The already complex relationship of silence and knowing/unknowing is further complicated when, as in Mary’s experience, people think they know or understand a situation, however because of pre-existing beliefs, in this case, the idea that women are better off when not alone, people lack a complete understanding of Mary’s life. Ironically, these prejudicial beliefs existing around the idea of women not able to care for themselves or live alone, assisted Mary in maintaining power to negotiate her own coming out or not coming out.

Mary’s example illustrates how a person can live authentically and still occupy a space that is institutionally forbidden. Mary did not deny herself a meaningful relationship nor did she conceal it from her community. However, she did not publicly name or label her relationship, thereby maintaining control of her self-disclosure, which assisted in creating a space where future possibilities might begin to develop.

In her book *The Gay Revolution*, Lillian Faderman discusses the career of Margaret “Midge” Costanza. Costanza was a city councilwoman for Rochester, New York and was one of the first people with a title to endorse Jimmy Carter in the state of New York.¹⁷⁷ Costanza was asked to be Carter’s New York State campaign Coordinator and later, upon his election in 1976, was asked to be the White House public liaison.¹⁷⁸ Costanza was a lesbian in a relationship with another woman, but had “cultivated the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 69.

¹⁷⁷ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 299.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 300.

image of a young woman too committed to her work to have amorous relations.”¹⁷⁹

Costanza’s effort in creating this image was undoubtedly assisted by sexist views of a woman’s inability to maintain a successful career and a meaningful personal life.

However, Costanza immediately engaged in White House meetings with lesbians and gays, primarily from the National Gay Task Force, to work on antidiscrimination

legislation and when word began to spread of these meetings, President Carter covered

and demoted her to “special assistant for women’s affairs and domestic human rights.”¹⁸⁰

Costanza resigned in August 1978.

Although Costanza was more secretive about her relationship with another woman than Mary is in her context, they are both examples of, in Mary’s words, “benefiting from sexism.” Even though Faderman reads Costanza as working to create a particular image of a woman committed to her work, which undoubtedly honors Costanza’s agency, it is important to not overlook the sexist views that existed in the 1970s and continue to exist in today’s society. For both women, it allowed them to exist with integrity and authenticity, and for Mary, she was able to maintain power over her own identity and to whom she revealed particular information.

The importance of maintaining the right to self-disclosure of one’s own identity revealed itself as important negotiating tools to participants in this study. Michael used his power of self-disclosure to come out to people that he believed could hurt him.

Michael’s narrative demonstrates that he holds some power in the shadow of the institutional power in which he is working. Michael’s coming out was an act of

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 304.

negotiating the power that the person in authority carried with them by virtue of their position. Lisa and Robert also shared similar sentiments about coming out to people that they believed could hurt them. Their acts of coming out not only opened the door to the closet that secured their identity, but in fact, welcomed the person to whom they came out, into the now shared space of the closet. Accordingly, the person in power could no longer claim a “passive innocence”¹⁸¹ of ignorance. The person in power, now knowingly, operated, at least in certain aspects, from the space of the closet (the church and its authorities create their own way of negotiating these realities in various ways, and these will be discussed later).

Sedgwick acknowledges, that “we have too much cause to know how limited a leverage any individual revelation can exercise over collectively scaled and institutionally embodied oppressions,” but admits that we cannot “deny how disproportionately powerful and disruptive such acts can be.”¹⁸² In other words, although individual acts of coming out may not, or in fact, will not, immediately change institutionally sanctioned exclusionary tactics, it still can be a valuable disruption, no matter how diminutive in appearance. The act of coming out, or perhaps more importantly, maintaining the control or power over revealing aspects of one’s identity, creates a space where imaginative possibilities begin to flourish. Sometimes, this imaginative space provides lesbian and gay ordained elders room to live authentically within an institution that does not affirm their identities.

¹⁸¹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 7.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 78.

Communicating One's Truth as a Way of Negotiation

Living into the imaginative space took many forms for the participants in the study. They spoke of their lives in nuanced ways so that they would not be lying. They learned to reframe things to maintain integrity. At times, this meant not being as forthcoming as some would want to be, but still living their truth. At other times, negotiating within the power structure of the institutional church meant living their everyday lives in a way that people could witness the participant's lives in the world. Therefore, relying on not only oral language, but also the language of human behavior as a way to communicate one's truth.

These various modes of communication demonstrate the complexity of power networks operating as lesbian and gay ordained elders maneuver through the institutional church. The experiences of lesbian and gay clergy illustrate Foucault's understanding that "modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power. Not only negative or repressive but also productive and enabling, power is 'exercised from innumerable points' to no predetermined effect."¹⁸³ The discriminatory rules against the LGBTQ community enacted by the United Methodist Church are not only repressive, but also productive. These statements by the UMC wield power "which runs through the entire social body...as a productive network,"¹⁸⁴ and produces a group of people that are viewed as outcasts, or incompatible with the socially constructed beliefs of the church.

¹⁸³ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 80.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Fortunately, power also produces discourse, which Foucault defines as “the heterogeneous collection of utterances that relate to a particular concept and thereby constitute and contest [the concept’s] meaning.”¹⁸⁵ In other words, contestation, that is, resistance, is created in response to power, and resistance manifests itself in discourse. Furthermore, discourse necessarily involves communication, and communication is understood as “includ(ing) all of the procedures by which one mind may affect another...[including] not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial art, the theatre, the ballet, and in fact all human behavior.”¹⁸⁶ The participants use a combination of language, silence, and ways of being, or more precisely, patterns of practice, to live authentically and communicate their truths as resistance to the institutional church’s stance on homosexuality.

For example, Mary shared that she never denied her sexuality to anyone, but claimed “a life of celibacy,” which kept her in the clear of being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.” She was not lying because she was not sexually involved with anyone at that particular time. Although being a self-avowed practicing homosexual is prohibited, living a life of celibacy is not prohibited.

Robert found alternate ways to speak his truth, his reality, without using the self-avowing words, “I am gay.” Speaking his personal truth was still guarded, and Robert admits, “there are times when I find myself not giving all of myself, or not telling my whole story, for fear of be found out.” Communicating his own truth took on the mantle

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 81.

¹⁸⁶ Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 1.

of “speak[ing] more truth in general about inclusion.” In other words, he began speaking about the inclusive love of God for everyone, for all creation.

Lisa spoke of her mentor helping her to “reframe things...to help me as a lesbian overcome the obstacles that normally would had stopped me from going through the process.” The reframing Lisa mentioned involved learning new ways to speak about the authority of scripture, specifically the idea of canon within canon, or the idea that everyone emphasizes some portion of scripture while diminishing the importance of other passages. Lisa also found the language of “Reconciling Ministries Network’s (RMN) definition of biblical obedience,” helpful in being able to speak about her life and call to ministry. RMN understands biblical obedience to have “broad and expansive expressions...[and] biblical obedience means we do not ask permission before living into our calling and recognizes that the call of Christ is superior to any other calling on our lives.”¹⁸⁷ Adopting the language of this statement provided Lisa a way to express herself authentically in living her call, while not using the language that would categorize her as a self-avowed practicing homosexual.

All of the participants in some manner relied on silence to live authentically. However, Don, Josh, and Kevin, all shared that one way of communicating their truths involved silence, or in Kevin’s words, “I was silent, a justified silence.” They were referring to the idea that they were able to live authentically because no one asked questions, and in Josh’s words, “[I] never lied, but I’ve certainly not been forthcoming.” Even without verbal communication, these men were able to communicate their truth

¹⁸⁷ Reconciling Ministries Network, *rmnetwork.org*, December 18, 2018, <https://rmnetwork.org/biblical-obedience/> (accessed December 18, 2018).

through the ways in which they lived their everyday lives, or what Foucault refers to as “micropractices...the social practices that constitute everyday life in modern societies.”¹⁸⁸ For them, living their everyday lives with their partners or boyfriends, constituted a pattern of practice that revealed truth in their everyday behavior.

Micropractices were key to Michael’s way of negotiating the institutional church. Michael described his method of negotiating the “self-avowed” wording found in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* as one where he would never say the three words, “I am gay,” but would demonstrate “this is how my life works.” He did this by inviting the bishop over to his house for dinner so that the bishop and the bishop’s wife to see how he lived with his partner. The bishop would see how Michael’s life worked, or at least see how one aspect of his life worked. Michael would always include his partner in events that took place in the church community and the larger community. This allowed people close to the couple and those people outside of the participant’s close circle of friends and acquaintances, to always see the two people together. In this way, through micropractices, the participant worked to “normalize gay relationships.”

In addition to these actions, Michael stated that he “did gay things.” For Michael, this meant engagement with music, the arts, and other ways of including “things about sexuality in veiled ways.” In this way, Michael was expanding the understanding of normative gender roles and opening the way for an expanded understanding of ways of being in the world.

¹⁸⁸ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 18.

Robert shared a similar story about his love of the arts with his interest in knitting and crocheting. He shared, “as a little kid, my grandma taught me to knit and crochet and I love it and still do it.” At his current appointment, the church “has a ladies group who crochets sleeping mats for the homeless shelters. When I first was appointed, I would go to their monthly gatherings and kind of shoot the breeze a little bit and they showed me how to make their plarn, the plastic yarn. They showed me how they crochet them into a mat and I got started with them. I started crocheting sleeping mats and I was careful...I was aware I was kind of outing my crochet hook.” Robert was keenly aware that his participation in the crocheting group might lead some to question his sexuality, but it was one way for him to authentically communicate his truth.

The participants’ negotiation through the institutional church requires them to submit to the categories that are available in the church culture. Examples of these categories include normative gender roles, having a significant other, or living a life of celibacy. The participants demonstrated how they “repeat the law with difference.”¹⁸⁹ For example, the church culture might have been that the ladies group does the crocheting. However, it would not be unusual for the pastor to be included in any group of the church that is meeting. Robert’s engaged participation in the group was not meant to completely change that cultural assumption, but his presence does add a difference to the group, thereby expanding the perception of who might be interested in becoming a member of the group.

Another example of living out a law with difference can be seen in the manner in which Michael works to normalize gay relationships and experiences. The UMC’s *Book*

¹⁸⁹ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 85.

of Discipline states that the proper relationship is between a man and a woman and does not give any respect to a committed, loving, same-sex relationship. Michael repeats the understanding of a committed relationship, but with the difference of the relationship existing between same-sex individuals. Michael did this through the stories and examples he used in the pulpit. These stories and examples expand the congregations understanding of what is possible beyond the current understanding.

The way in which the participants communicated their truth so they could live authentically into their call is an important way of negotiating the institutional church. The participants found other, meaningful ways to live their truth and avoid the self-avowing statement, “I am gay.” As Michael shared, he did not say, “psst, psst, by the way I am gay,” but by talking about and living out what was important and of value to them, the participants left large hints to allow others to piece things together about their sexuality.

Extension Ministries as a Way of Negotiating

Living authentically while serving in churches where not everyone is open and affirming to LGBTQ people presents many challenges. Whether or not one is intentionally leaving hints about one’s identity, the congregations which ordained elders serve will undoubtedly want to get to know the person in a sincere way. According to the UMC *Book of Discipline*, elders are “called to bear authority and responsibility to preach and teach the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to order the life of the church so it can be faithful in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 227.

In other words, the pastor of the congregation is seen not only as the moral exemplar administering the sacraments and preaching the Word, but also, specifically in parish ministry, as a member of the church family and the larger community outside the church.

As members of the community, especially smaller communities, it is potentially harder to maintain control over being out about one's sexuality. According to an article published in 2017, around forty percent of United Methodist Churches had Sunday attendance of fewer than 35 people in 2015.¹⁹¹ In addition, around forty-two percent of the UMC's members live in rural areas.¹⁹² These are indicators that a large number of United Methodist Churches are located in small communities and the congregations themselves are small in number. These small numbers contribute to the very public nature of one's life and the difficulty in maintaining a private life.

As pastors and members of the church, ordained elders are expected to participate in activities that support the life of the congregation. These might include church potlucks, larger community dinners, and social events. Mary, who pastors a rural congregation, shared a story about a Valentine's Day dinner her church holds for the community each year. She and her partner attend together each year, and according to Mary, some people know they are a couple and others think she is just bringing the friend who is her roommate.

¹⁹¹ Yonat Shimron, *legacy-ministries-dying-churches-give-congregations-way-end-well*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/legacy-ministries-dying-churches-give-congregations-way-end-well> (accessed December 18, 2018).

¹⁹² Linda Bloom, *https://www.umnews.org/en/news/remember-rural-churches-advocates-say*, May 14, 2016, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/remember-rural-churches-advocates-say> (accessed December 18, 2018).

Other events that present themselves as places where one's character has the potential to be monitored by others in the congregation, because they are continuously operating in their role as pastor, include, funerals, weddings, graduations, and birthday parties. The pastor might also choose to attend sporting or musical events to support members of their congregation. In addition, the normal tasks of trips to the grocery store, pharmacy, post office, or eating at a restaurant with one's family or significant other, are all places where the person is still perceived as operating in the role of pastor. The line between work hours and family time is further blurred due to the nature of parish ministry and the need for providing pastoral care at any time, for example, medical emergencies, other crisis, and visitations to members of the congregation.

A final factor that contributes to the consistent monitoring of one's personal life is that the ordained elder often lives in a house owned by the congregation, leading some members of the congregation to think they have access to the home at any time. Mary shared that although she lived with her partner in a rural community, they lived in a house not owned by the congregation, and this helped in distinguishing a line between private and workspace. Perhaps due to the rural, small town culture, living in a home not owned by the congregation did not prevent random "drop-ins" by members of the community, but it seemed to lessen the sense of ownership over the pastor's living situation.

A person serving as a pastor in parish ministry lives an extremely visible life, to the local community, as well as, leaders above them in the hierarchy of the institutional church, such as the district superintendent and bishop. Some of the participants shared stories of members in their local churches filing complaints against them and pressuring the District Superintendent to move the particular pastor to a new charge. In response to

being moved, Michael found work in an extension ministry that allowed him to be in the service of God and in the process remove himself from the more direct connection of the local church to the oversight of the institutional church.

A third way in which some of the pastors negotiated the watchful gaze of the church was through extension ministries, which are ministry settings beyond the local church. The participants understand that they are held to high standard of behavior and that by entering the ministerial space of an Elder in the United Methodist Church they have entered a space that is constantly monitored and

in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, [and] examined...constitut[ing] a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.¹⁹³

This mechanism of power is mobilized through the constant monitoring illustrated by Foucault's use of Bentham's panopticon. This illustration consists of a peripheral building and a central tower. The peripheral building is divided into cells, or rooms, with a window facing the tower so that a guard in the central tower can monitor the prisoners. Although, unlike the prisoners, pastors carry a significant level of status in the community, and choose to enter into this relationship, the power dynamic of always being monitored assists in understanding the reality of pastors in the church.

Parish ministry appears to be a room or theatre close to the central tower, "in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible."¹⁹⁴ In parish

¹⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 197.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 200.

ministry, although the pastor is individualized, they are constantly visible to the community and their behavior is, or can be, constantly monitored and can be reported to the “central tower,” in this case, the institutional church. In addition to the gaze of the congregation, the pastor is consistently monitored by the district superintendent, and in direct connection to the annual, general, and jurisdictional conferences.¹⁹⁵

However, the ordained Elder, whether in parish ministry or extension ministry, does not escape the panopticon completely. The window into the lives of the ordained elders begins with the spiritual autobiography that is written when the person begins the candidacy process for ordained ministry and continues throughout their ministries in whichever context they find themselves. An ordained Elder in an extension ministry is still in relationship with the church and accountable to the annual conference.¹⁹⁶

The concept of the panopticon is explicated further by Bentham, when he states that the power the panopticon manifests should be “visible and unverifiable.”¹⁹⁷ In the case of ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church, power is visible by seeing the institution of the church and the people that serve in supervisory roles, and it is unverifiable, in so far as the clergy do not know if they are being watched, but that they may be observed at any time. Observation at any time is especially a factor in parish ministry where the pastor becomes a central figure in the community.

¹⁹⁵ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 265.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 280.

¹⁹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 201.

Extension ministries provided, at least in a sense, a brief reprieve from the constant monitoring of the institutional church and the whole church community. Extension ministries “are ministries that extend the ministry of the local United Methodist church. Elders in such appointments remain within the itinerancy and are accountable to the annual conference.”¹⁹⁸ There are different contexts that are approved for extension ministries, for example, Don entered into hospital chaplaincy and Michael and Lisa served as executive directors in nonprofit agencies. This provided space for them to live out their call and live an authentic personal life without the constant social observation of a congregation.

Don shared that he “went for a job as a chaplain because there was no way I was going to find a church, I wasn’t going back in the closet in order to serve a church and I had been doing that and I couldn’t do that anymore.” Working as a hospital chaplain freed him from attending annual and general conferences because he stated, “that is for people serving churches.” Chaplaincy provided enough room for him to live his desired life.

Michael was serving as an associate pastor at a church and a member of the congregation wrote a letter to the bishop stating that Michael was gay. The bishop let the complaint just “fall away.” However, when Michael asked for a new appointment, the district superintendent told Michael that as long as Michael and his partner were living together there would be no new appointment. According to Michael, “that just kicked off my rage at the church. Just suddenly, symbolically, said everything. I had been running

¹⁹⁸ The United Methodist Church, *www.umc.org*, June 12, 2018, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/glossary-appointment-to-extension-ministries> (accessed June 12, 2018).

under the radar screen. I was so mad. So I channeled my anger and found myself a job being executive director of a nonprofit.” The district superintendent was resistant to Michael’s appointment beyond the local church (extension ministry), saying that “there is no way you need to be ordained to Word, Sacrament, and Order for that.” Michael told the district superintendent he was going to make the case to the bishop. Michael did just that and the bishop approved Michael’s appointment to an extension ministry.

Lisa’s transition into a nonprofit agency happened because she “refused to go into an appointment in the closet.” The district superintendent knew she was a lesbian and asked her to build relationships in the congregation before she came out to them. Lisa was not going back in the closet to serve a church, so she “found her own ministry settings in nonprofits where my pay is paid not by the church but by a nonprofit.”

Distancing themselves from the church through extension ministries works in some respects, but does not completely eliminate connection to the institutional church. People who are appointed to extension ministries “remain within the itineracy...[and] their effectiveness shall be evaluated in the context of the specific setting in which their ministry is performed.”¹⁹⁹ The person appointed to an extension ministry is still accountable to the annual conference, district superintendent, and bishop. As seen in Michael’s story, the person must also gain approval from the church for their extension ministry. Even though the person averts the everyday observations that are part of the parish ministry context, in an extension ministry, they are still subject to the institutional church.

¹⁹⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 280.

Eventually Michael and Lisa returned to the local church contexts to serve as pastors in the church. It was not required of them to remain in the closet, although they were told to “allow people to get to know them first,” and it was clear to them that the church was still “looking the other way.” For Michael, his return to parish ministry was over ten years ago, and for Lisa her return to parish ministry was a couple of years ago, but the participants eventually felt comfortable returning to local church ministry. Michael’s return was due, in part, to the bishop notifying him that there was a church available for him to lead, and pastoring a church is Michael’s vocation. The growing influence of the Reconciling Movement was the motivating factor for Lisa’s return to parish ministry. She felt that there was a larger support network of people in the church that would help her succeed in parish ministry.

Although Kevin did not work in an extension ministry, he shared that he distanced himself from the institutional church by not participating in all the connectional opportunities offered by the institutional church. The opportunities to which he referred to were opportunities to engage with other pastors in the UMC itinerate system. He did not participate, “simply because I can’t handle the hypocrisy, I can’t handle the false niceties...that you want to have a conversation with me because we are both ordained, but at the same time if I wasn’t ordained and on equal footing with you, you would discard me like trash.” Kevin shared that he did good work and that he believed this is why people who could cause trouble for him did not ask questions or raise any alarms.

Doing Good Work as a Way of Negotiating

All of the participants stated in various ways that they believed that “nobody bothered [them] because they did good work” or worked hard. Participants may have

believed this, at least partially, because of the belief in meritocracy, that is, “the belief that you get out the system what you put into it.”²⁰⁰ In other words, there is a belief in a culture that supposedly rewards good work.

The ideals of an American work ethic can be traced back to the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, in response to the Roman Catholic Church and its emphasis on monasticism,²⁰¹ recognizes that “labor in secular calling appears as the outward expression of Christian charity.”²⁰² In contrast to retreating from the world and rising above this world, as in some instances of monasticism, Luther states that the only way to please God is to fulfill one’s duty in this life,²⁰³ thus, “eliminat[ing] the distinction between working and serving God.”²⁰⁴ Luther understands “calling” to “carry at least *some* religious connotations—namely, those of a *task* set by *God*.”²⁰⁵ In other words, one’s work becomes the calling through which one can serve God.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁰ Stephen J. McNamee, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 1.

²⁰¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 29.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Gayle Porter, "Work Ethic and Ethical Work: Distortions in the American Dream," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2010: 535-550, 537.

²⁰⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 28.

²⁰⁶ Porter, "Work Ethic," 537.

For John Wesley, and therefore Methodism, good works are “the grounds for recognizing”²⁰⁷ the state of grace given by God. Along with the feeling of the experience of a state of grace, work becomes the condition of grace,²⁰⁸ that is, the ability to do good work becomes proof that one has received God’s grace. John Wesley’s theology also included the belief that grace could be lost. The belief that grace could be lost, “what Weber called ‘salvation anxiety’,”²⁰⁹ led people to seek assurances that they maintained the state of grace. The obvious proof, or sign, of living in the light of God’s grace was the success of one’s work.

Therefore, people worked hard, and the rewards and successes were signs of God’s grace. Eventually, people began to believe that the rewards and successes were proportionate to how hard an individual works. This belief is foundational to the idea of the American Dream, which is “fundamentally rooted in the historical experience of the United States as a nation of immigrants, [a place where] its citizens were ‘free’ to achieve on their own merits.”²¹⁰ In other words, one’s success is based on how hard one works, and success is a sign of God’s blessing. The resulting belief is that God would surely bless a hardworking, and therefore good and moral person, and this blessed person, or person with merit, is surely among God’s elect.

²⁰⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 96.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ McNamee, *The Meritocracy Myth*, 4.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 2.

These beliefs are foundational to the operations of meritocracy, and to clearly state what is meant by meritocracy, “meritocracy refers to a social system as a whole in which individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities.”²¹¹ Additionally, the underlying concept in meritocracy is “the notion of the ‘best person for the job’—an ideology based on principles of ‘sameness’.”²¹² In other words, in meritocracy, everyone has the same opportunity, but it is their commitment to hard work that determines their success. In addition, since meritocracy relies on principles of “sameness”, differences are supposedly erased.

The concept of sameness seems central to understanding why the participants stated that they “just worked hard,” and people left them alone. Not only did they work hard, but also the participants felt the added pressure of making sure the work was “good,” whatever that might mean. Lisa shared that she believed “nobody bothered me because I (was) doing good work.” By working hard and doing good work, the participants were showing that they were the “best person for the job,” working to erase any differences, specifically their sexuality, that would raise alarms and be an immediate disqualifier for serving as an ordained clergyperson. The participants were attempting to distance themselves from their sexuality by drawing the focus to their achievements.

However, sometimes the good work in which the participants were engaging did not align with the congregations’ views to which they were appointed. For example,

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ruth Simpson, Anne Ross-Smith and Patricia Lewis, "Merit, Special Contribution and Choice: How women negotiate between sameness and difference in their organizational lives," *Gender in Management: An International Journal* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited) 25, no. 3 (2010): 198-207, 198

during the 1980s, Mary was serving a city church in a conservative community. This was in the early years of the AIDS epidemic and she was aware of the need for education about HIV and AIDS. Mary worked with the AIDS coalition to develop and deliver AIDS programs in schools. According to Mary, her involvement with the AIDS coalition “made the church nervous and they wanted me to move. The excuse was that I talked too much about mission.” Mary was eventually reappointed to another church.

In this example, the good work Mary believed she was engaging in did not erase the difference, but only illuminated the uniqueness of Mary’s call to be a light to the world. Mary’s identification with the LGBTQ community was foundational to her desire to minister to the community through education about a disease that was spreading predominantly through the gay community, but was a risk for everyone. In addition, Mary’s hope was that education would help others have more compassion for the individuals living with HIV/AIDS and their families. Although the UMC now has a statement about *Persons Living with HIV and AIDS*,²¹³ at the time, what the church still deems incompatible with Christian teaching, Mary’s sexuality, was one of the contributing factors that made her uniquely prophetic for the church and the world.

So the benefit of meritocracy for lesbian and gay clergy is that it allows the church to view them as just as good as their straight colleagues, as far as, maintaining or growing a church. Lesbian and gay clergy are also able to maintain the finances of the church, paying their apportionments and contributing to missions and church programming. However, reliance on meritocracy, especially with the reliance on

²¹³ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 129-130.

sameness, diminishes part of one's identity that contributes to being uniquely called and specially gifted.

Cultural Changes Shift Negotiating Power

Negotiating space to exist as a lesbian or gay clergyperson requires multifaceted strategies that operate in a constantly evolving context. The strategies discussed included how one communicates one's identity, both verbal and nonverbal, and the distancing of one's self from the central institutional church and also distancing one's self from one's own identity. Additionally, as first discussed, Michael and Lisa, amongst other participants, shared stories of "coming out" to their district superintendents and other people in positions of power, and in turn, inviting those people into the shared space of the closet, thus making the existence of the closet more salient, leading to an apocalyptic rupture²¹⁴ that is the reality of queer clergy. Slowly opening the closet door and inviting people into that space is one of many factors leading to the rupture of the thinly lined allusion of the knowingness of who may or may not be called into ministry.

Issues around sexuality have been in the purview of the United Methodist Church since its formation in 1968. As described in chapter four, the UMC was formed during a time when social movements were at a peak. Although groups working for LGBTQ equal rights in America can be traced back as early as 1924,²¹⁵ the events at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 solidified the queer community as a political entity.²¹⁶ In the 1970s, the

²¹⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 68.

²¹⁵ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 24.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 30.

American Psychiatric Association removed “homosexuality” from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.²¹⁷

The 1980s was a decade of tragedy for the LGBTQ community, as it suffered the losses of many family, friends, lovers, partners, and acquaintances to the AIDS epidemic. The HIV/AIDS epidemic also contributed to a kind of confirmation of the prejudicial beliefs about the gay community held by society. However, leaders in the gay community witnessed “an irony that despite the horrors of the plague, the late eighties and early nineties was also a period of some collective healing in the gay community...learn[ing] to work together a little better than...before.”²¹⁸ With a new sense of collective identity, the gay community continued to work for equality, acceptance, and a positive shift in the attitudes of American society.

In fact, U.S. cultural attitudes toward the LGBTQ community seem to be shifting in a positive direction. Various Gallup polls²¹⁹ and Pew Research Center polls reveal that amongst adults, the view that homosexuality should be accepted increased from 50% in 2007 to 62% in 2014.²²⁰ Institutionally, the Supreme Court’s ruling in 2003 that sodomy laws across America were unconstitutional, the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in 2010, and the national legalization of same-sex marriage in June of 2015 demonstrate that rights for the LGBTQ community are moving in a positive direction.

²¹⁷ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 102.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 440.

²¹⁹ Gallup, *Gallup.com*, June 12, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx> (accessed June 12, 2018).

²²⁰ *Ibid*.

Shifting attitudes are revealed in mainline denominations as well. The United Church of Christ has ordained LGBTQ pastors since 1972,²²¹ and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly "passed a resolution in 1991 stating that, 'Gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America',"²²² and have ordained LGBTQ clergy since 2010. In addition, the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted policies that permit the ordination of LGBTQ individuals in 2010, and these amendments were ratified in 2011.²²³

The United Methodist Church is still working to define where it stands in regards to the LGBTQ community and ordination. Throughout the UMC's history, groups on both sides of the debate have been formed to promote their corresponding beliefs and ideas. The Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) is an organization that works for the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the UMC. For some participants in this study, participation in RMN gave them renewed energy and hope for the church. Robert stated that the reconciling process, that is, the process a church goes through to join RMN, "has really given me a lot of courage just to speak more truth in general about inclusion, but it

²²¹ Human Rights Campaign, *hrc.org*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-united-church-of-christ> (accessed June 12, 2018).

²²² Human Rights Campaign, *hrc.org*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-evangelical-lutheran-church-in-america> (accessed June 12, 2018).

²²³ Human Rights Campaign, *hrc.org*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-presbyterian-church-usa> (accessed June 12, 2018).

has also given me a dose of courage to speak my own personal truth, guarded, but to speak a little more of it.” RMN provides a network not only for lesbian and gay clergy, but also for individuals and congregations that support them, to organize and offer a systematic approach to move the church toward inclusion of LGBTQ people.

All of these cultural ruptures contributed to the voices for LGBTQ inclusion in the United Methodist Church to reach a level that many believed could not be pushed aside at the 2016 General Conference. In addition, the networks that formed to support LGBTQ inclusion transformed lesbian and gay clergy’s negotiating of the institutional church from a strategic and deliberate coming out to people in positions of power, to a coming out so that everyone was invited in to occupy the space of the now open closet.

In January 2016, a few months ahead of the United Methodist General Conference, Kansas pastor Reverend Cynthia Meyer, came out to her congregation in rural Kansas. She was placed on leave as charges were brought against her, but she has since left the denomination.²²⁴ In addition, three days before the beginning of General Conference in Portland, Oregon, Reverend David Meredith married his longtime partner. The date was deliberately chosen by Rev. Meredith as an open statement against the United Methodist Church’s language in the *Book of Discipline* against the LGBTQ community.²²⁵

²²⁴ Emily McFarlan Miller, *Religionnews.com*, August 3, 2016, <https://religionnews.com/2016/08/03/kansas-united-methodist-pastor-placed-on-leave-after-coming-out-as-a-lesbian/> (accessed June 13, 2018).

²²⁵ JoAnne Viviano, "United Methodist minister and partner marry in defiance of church," *dispatch.com*, May 7, 2016, <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/05/07/couple-marries-in-defiance-of-church.html> (accessed May 7, 2016).

Another example of the ruptures happening in the church is of the “Love Letter” to the church sent and signed by lesbian and gay clergy in the United Methodist Church. Over one hundred and twenty-five LGBTQI clergy, including deacons and local pastors, sent the letter on May 9, 2016. The people who signed the letter made a declaration to the church and as a statement of hope for LGBTQI people that were members of the United Methodist Church.²²⁶ In fact, four of the study’s participants signed the letter.

Finally, in July 2016, Rev. Karen Oliveto was elected Bishop for the Mountain Sky Area. She is the first openly lesbian bishop in the United Methodist Church. Charges have been filed against the clergy who have come out. The United Methodist Church’s top court said that Bishop Oliveto’s election was against church law, but that she remained in good standing with church.²²⁷ Rev. Meredith is still fighting the charges against him. The West Ohio Committee dismissed some of the charges, but the North Central Jurisdiction Committee on Appeals decided that the West Ohio Committee made errors in their dismissal of some of the charges. However, the West Ohio Committee was asked to hold off on reexamining these charges until after the special general conference to be held in February 2019.²²⁸

²²⁶ Reconciling Ministries Network, *Believeoutloud.com*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.believeoutloud.com/latest/love-letter-our-church-your-lgbtqi-religious-leaders> (accessed June 13, 2018).

²²⁷ Linda Bloom, *umc.org*, April 28, 2017, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/consecration-of-gay-bishop-against-church-law> (accessed June 13, 2018).

²²⁸ Kathy L. Gilbert, *umc.org*, March 20, 2018, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/gay-pastors-case-heads-back-to-west-ohio-committee> (accessed June 13, 2018).

Rev. Meredith is spending time fighting charges against him, time that could potentially be spent in important ministries. Some of the participants commented about the time they spend on negotiating the church. Robert shared that he eagerly anticipates the time when he no longer has to spend energy on concealing his sexuality or worrying about if someone brings charges against him. Lisa also commented on the hope for a time when she would not have to spend energy on negotiating her identity with the church.

Kevin was the participant closest to complete exhaustion with the church and potential for leaving. He shared that he was “running out of grace to take a stand to my brothers and sisters...who don’t recognize the pain they are causing. I feel like there is fight for justice, there is a fight for freedom, there is a fight for God’s living grace to be known. But I think there also comes a point where you have to say, I have no fight left in me because the system I am fighting against is never going to change...and then just acknowledging that my energy, my gifts, my spirit could be used elsewhere.”

Michael also hopes for a time when he no longer has to use energy to hide. Michael stated that the more he is out to his congregation and to people in places of power, that he is a better pastor. He shared, “I am better at what I do because there is no energy spent on either hiding or trying to work the system to my advantage or to my own protection.” Michael’s statement reveals, at least a potential, piece of what the experience of being out and no longer having to negotiate might be like for others. He and the others will be even better pastors.

After years of deflecting, ignoring, or quietly negotiating the reality of lesbian and gay clergy in the denomination, the United Methodist Church is at a watershed moment

in the history of the church. However, even with the mass coming out of queer clergy and the rise in favorable public opinion for LGBTQ equality and LGBTQ people in general, the United Methodist Church has seemingly dug in its heels and queer clergy remain as part of the denomination. Why are lesbian and gay clergy staying in the denomination? The question of why stay revealed the final theme that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven: Why Stay

The third theme, the participants' motivation to create change from within, emerged from a discussion of why the participants stay in the United Methodist Church. If I had to pick one central question that I was hoping to explore, it would be why one chooses to stay in an institution that views certain people as incompatible with the teachings they subscribe to, particularly a church that does not value one's personhood. As someone who began the candidacy process for ordination in the United Methodist Church (UMC) but removed myself from the candidacy process years ago, I remain a member in the UMC. However, I continuously re-evaluate my membership in the UMC and consider leaving for a denomination friendlier to LGBTQ persons such as the United Church of Christ (UCC). I consider what staying in the UMC means for me personally, that is, my spiritual sustenance and emotional wellbeing, as the churches struggle to decide how the UMC as an institution is going to address the LGBTQ community.

One of the main reasons I ended my participation in the candidacy process was that I was not willing to be in the closet in order to live out my calling. I knew there were lesbian and gay clergy in the United Methodist Church and that they could not be completely "out" as ordained elders in the UMC. Prior to the interview process I expected to find either participants that were focused on changing the UMC's stance on homosexuality, or lesbian and gay ordained elders that were neglecting the part of their personhood the church deemed incompatible and were being forced to lie about a part of

their identity in order to serve the church, forcibly remaining in the closet. However, what was discovered is that these were not mutually exclusive findings.

Why remain in the closet when there are many benefits to being out?

Furthermore, why stay in church that does not value one's whole being? On one hand, being out could be especially beneficial if one feels called to leadership in the church and could be a role model for other lesbian and gay Christians searching for healing and reconciliation with the church. On the other hand, however, there is the risk of losing one's clergy credentials and not serving as an elder, or any ordained clergy, in the UMC.

Thinking in binary terms of either being in or out of the closet does not adequately represent the experiences, or in fact, the realities, of the lesbian and gay clergy in this study, and the queer community in general. Disclosure of one's identity is not as much a grand coming out party complete with disco balls and glitter, as it is a "management of information...[where] the space for simply existing as a gay person who is a [clergyperson] is in fact bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden."²²⁹ In other words, a lesbian or gay clergyperson is at once the subject of the intrusive wondering "are they?", or "could they be?", in which they feel obligated to respond to honor their own authenticity. In addition, a lesbian or gay clergy person is keenly aware of the risks of claiming an institutionally sanctioned forbidden identity.

The details of revealing one's identity, that is the management of one's own information, were highlighted in the chapter on negotiating the institution. The

²²⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 70.

discussion revealed how one does, or does not, reveal certain details of one's life, and the timing of concealing or revealing. Coming out, in chapter six, was viewed as a negotiating tactic, but it also reveals how lesbian and gay clergy are creating a "critical space within social structures."²³⁰ The positioning of "within" is important not only because of my belief that "the only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within,"²³¹ but also that "social and political change requires interaction with and intervention in... 'the dominant social text'. This change is *necessarily a local operation*, one involving political action at particular locations in our lives independent of global or universal theories (emphasis added)."²³² The belief that change begins locally, from within an institution, assists in validating lesbian and gay ordained elders maintaining their membership in the UMC. The belief in change happening from within was revealed in some of the statements shared by the participants. Lisa shared that she desired to "create change from the inside," and that if she left, she "would be irrelevant and not useful." Kevin stated, "you can't change a thing if you leave a thing." The participants are slowly carving out space to exist as lesbian and gay clergy.

The creation of this space and of "coming out" needs to be understood as a process. The intricacies of managing one's personal information about one's identity, in particular coming out, demonstrate that "coming out is partially a process of revealing

²³⁰ Shane Phelan, "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics," *Signs* (The University of Chicago Press), 1993: 765-790, 766.

²³¹ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 22.

²³² Phelan, *(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics*, 766.

something kept hidden, but it is more than that. It is a process of fashioning a self—a lesbian or gay self—that did not exist before coming out began.”²³³ The process occurs at different rates and is affected by not only those “coming out”, but also by those who have received the new information. For example, Lisa was asked to not come out immediately to a new congregation, to “let the church get to know her first.” She decided she did not want to “go back in the closet,” so she opted to find an extension ministry. By choosing not to serve the congregation, she affected the process of coming out.

Alternatively, Michael and Kevin both shared experiences of members of their congregations or clergy members writing complaints to the Bishop about Michael and Kevin being gay. This, too, affects the process of coming out and the creation of critical space in which to engage in institutional change. The congregational members to whom the information was given interrupted the process of the creation of new descriptive space. Often times, the Bishop dealt with the complaints by simply allowing them to fall to the wayside without formally addressing them. This allowed the process of coming out, or the carving out of wider social space, to continue with perhaps minor interruptions, but no major disruptions. These interruptions are often the result of the fact that coming out, especially for clergy serving a congregation, happens within the contexts of social relationships over which the person is not in full control.

So it is, in fact, that the participants are not wholly neglecting their identities and living inauthentic lives. The participants are engaging in the processes of coming out, they are “(be)coming out”, and fashioning a new identity as a lesbian or gay clergyperson. They are working to carve out an ever-widening social space in which

²³³ Ibid, 774.

change can begin to occur. However, just as the meaning of being “out” requires a more expansive understanding, the reasons for why the participants are staying in the denomination are more than only to create radical, social change.

Relationships and Creating a Theological Home

“Relationships keep me in the UMC,” Robert shared. Michael’s comment that “I’ll stay where I am familiar, where I am known, and I have influence,” also speaks to the building of relationships in the church. Mary stated that she “felt at home in the UMC,” and Josh articulated, “the UMC is my faith home.” These statements are just a few examples of the participants remaining in the church for psychological reasons, such as, feelings of belonging and spiritual experiences of transformation.

In an article discussing how his theological home informs his work, Charles W. Taylor builds on the definition of theological home as “the theological sources you use and the way you listen to them.”²³⁴ Taylor states that theological houses are “built of four basic components—scripture, tradition, cultural information (the culture’s worldview and knowledge), and the experience of the faithful.”²³⁵ For United Methodists, the components are understood as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and consist of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.²³⁶ Taylor continues, “the differences between theological houses has to do with arrangements of these components...[and] are arranged

²³⁴ Charles W. Taylor, "My Theological Home Is In An Asymmetrical Duplex," *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 2015: 38-43, 38.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Alan K. Waltz, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, January 1, 1991, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleyan-quadrilateral> (accessed January 9, 2019).

with distinct purposes in mind: to provide refuge, to give a sense of order, to liberate.”²³⁷ Furthermore, a house becomes a home, according to Taylor, “when the inhabitants gather in it and express their life together.”²³⁸ Taylor offers one example of the expression of life as Sunday worship for the Christian community. Beyond Sunday worship, members of the UMC have many opportunities to build relationships in the church, or to create, build, and express life together as a community.

In other words, through expressing life together as a community, relationships are built and the community begins to feel like a home for its participants. For Mary, not only was her father a pastor in the United Brethren, which joined to form the UMC, but she shared that the “church (UMC) stepped up with care when her brother died.” Mary had been temporarily attending the MCC (Metropolitan Community Churches), but felt that “they only focused on sexuality and spirituality...all they cared about was ‘gayness’.” It was at this time that she experienced the loss of her brother, and the UMC, not the MCC, offered her pastoral care during her time of loss. She valued the UMC for “focus(ing) on the whole human process.” The UMC created and offered a community where she felt the full expression of life.

In addition to Mary, Josh and Kevin both grew up in the United Methodist Church. It was in the experience of life in community with others in the UMC that Josh felt the UMC had “nurtured me in my faith.” For Kevin, it was the early experiences of his grandparents bringing him to church every Sunday that “formed me theologically.”

²³⁷ Taylor, "My Theological Home," 38.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Through the UMC community that Robert's aunts introduced him to, he experienced self-acceptance and spiritual transformation.

Although expressed in various ways, the feelings of being nurtured, transformed, and guided, are all part of expressing life in community, a community of people sharing in the human experience. Six of the seven participants claim a childhood affiliation with the UMC, creating a foundational theology and sense of community within the UMC from an early age. As they matured and began to understand their own sexual identity, this religious foundation proved to be a hurdle in some ways, but in other ways, the foundation was helpful in remembering they are children of God, of sacred worth, and created in the image of God.²³⁹ Contrary to the institutional church, the participants were able to finally feel and acceptance of themselves as lesbian or gay, *and* Christian, through a particular congregation, or members in the UMC community, that was open and affirming of lesbian and gay people.

In fact, there are individual congregations within the United Methodist denomination that are affirming of the LGBTQ community, while other congregations are not willing to open their hearts, minds, and doors to LGBTQ people. In this study, participants spoke of particular individuals, groups of people, or congregations in the United Methodist Church, who helped them reconcile their sexual identity with their Christian identity, and attend to the whole person. This reconciliation is occurring in congregations within a denomination that states in its *Book of Discipline* that

²³⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 111.

homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. These congregations are participating in “de facto congregationalism.”²⁴⁰

According to sociologist R. Stephen Warner, “de facto congregationalism implies that congregations can chart their own religious course despite their denominational ties...[and] also means that the local church is effectively constituted by its members, not by geography.”²⁴¹ This definition seems to fit reconciling congregations in the UMC. Even though the establishment of a reconciling, or LGBTQ friendly church, might be more likely in an urban setting,²⁴² it is possible that those who participate in the life of the congregation drive from different neighborhoods to be part of the community.

The mobilization of potential members of congregations is due in part to the long history of the disestablishment of religion in the United States. Religion in the United States is one of voluntary association, that is, membership in a religious organization is not required but is a choice made by an individual. Warner defines “the American Protestant congregation...[as] an assembly of people who choose to be together...[and] create it continuously by their continuous consent.”²⁴³ In other words, a congregation is a group of individuals who opt in to the community, worship together,²⁴⁴ share together the experience of life, and maintain the community through faithful support of individuals

²⁴⁰ R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

²⁴¹ Ibid, 163.

²⁴² Ibid, 33-34.

²⁴³ Ibid, 157.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 153.

and concern for the collective.²⁴⁵ In addition, this congregation within a particular denomination can vary in its theological and social concerns.

The United Methodist Church accounts for diversity in its *Book of Discipline*.

Under the heading of *The Nurturing Community*, it states,

Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance. We therefore support climates in which human communities are maintained and also encourage all individuals to be sensitive to others by using appropriate language when referring to all persons.²⁴⁶

Additionally, under the heading of *Culture and Identity*, it states,

The church seeks to fully embrace and nurture cultural formation and competency as a means to be fully one body, expressed in multiple ways. Each of us has multiple identities of equal value that intersect to form our complete self. We affirm that no identity or culture has more legitimacy than any other.²⁴⁷

It appears that the church has ambivalence and openness built into its governing documents. Perhaps it is the recognition that all communities are not of one mind culturally or theologically. Additionally, the congregations in the different communities would not be identical throughout the denomination, and this diversity necessarily provides a space for the members to “define the terms of discourse.”²⁴⁸ That is, individual congregations exhibit some variances in how it engages with society, social issues, and theological reflection.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 110.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Warner, *Church of Our Own*, 158.

Theological reflection in the United Methodist Church utilizes four sources, scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, to “illuminate the core of the Christian Faith.”²⁴⁹ Scripture, for the UMC, is the primary source. Lisa shared that the idea of “canon within the canon” was a valuable tool for her in reconciling her faith and sexuality. For her, the idea of canon within the canon raised her awareness that through one’s own experiences and worldview, one privileges certain scripture over other scripture. In addition, there is an acknowledgement that readers of scripture read it through their own, individual, interpretive lenses in which they attempt to make meaning of the scripture or text, and apply it to their lives. Contrary to a fundamentalist or foundationalist,²⁵⁰ reading of scripture, there is the understanding “that the ‘text itself’ does not exercise its own ‘agency’ in its own interpretation,”²⁵¹ and takes into consideration the agency of the reader in interpreting the text. Therefore, in different congregations, although scripture is still a central source for theological reflection, how one understands the reading and interpretation of scripture varies.

Variations exist in the other sources of theological reflection as well.

Institutionally, the remaining three sources for theological reflection are defined as follows. Tradition, or a “living tradition” according to the UMC website, refers to the “countless witnesses” between the New Testament and the current time, through whose

²⁴⁹ Alan K. Waltz, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, January 1, 1991, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleyan-quadrilateral> (accessed January 9, 2019).

²⁵⁰ Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1-3.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1.

“words in creed, hymn, discourse, and prayer...we discover Christian insight by which our study of the Bible is illuminated.”²⁵² The third theological source, experience, not only includes the experience of “the new life in Christ,” but also the broader, cumulative experiences.²⁵³ Finally, “through reason the individual Christian brings to bear on the Christian faith discerning and cogent thought.”²⁵⁴ Reason is our attempt to organize and make sense of our faith in relation to human knowledge.

The theological sources are not four distinct entities that are consulted individually. Although scripture might be primary, it does not mean that the reading of scripture is not informed by our experience or our reason. A living tradition provides historical knowledge and examples of a community’s identity, and “shapes present life by furnishing a common memory...that, in turn, yields a guiding principle.”²⁵⁵ Douglas Ottati continues in his discussion of a living tradition stating, “to stand in a living tradition...is to participate in a dynamic process of interpretation—one that moves between received heritage and the realities and challenges of the present world in order to express a continuing and vital identity.”²⁵⁶ A stalwart, fixed tradition that invalidates the lives, experiences, and realities of particular people will begin to lose its sphere of

²⁵² George Koehler, *Theological Guidelines*, January 1, 2006, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/theological-guidelines> (accessed January 7, 2019).

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Alan K. Waltz, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, January 1, 1991.

²⁵⁵ Douglas F. Ottati, *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 3.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 5.

influence and cease to be alive in the world. The dynamic process of interpretation of tradition, so that a community remains relevant in modern times, is also informed by our experience and reason.

The participants in the study found congregations that respected the central importance of interpreting scripture. Additionally, these congregations honored the guiding principles of tradition, taking what came before and applying it faithfully to modern concerns to sustain the living in a living tradition. Perhaps most importantly, the congregations valued the experiences of the lesbian and gay people exploring their calls to ministry. Their experiences and identities were validated. The full range of human knowledge, on which reason is supposed to be based, includes new understandings of human sexuality, for example, the idea of a mutual, loving, same-sex relationship. The inclusion of these new understandings assisted in the reconciling of faith and sexuality.

These congregations functioned as “protected enclaves in a hostile world.”²⁵⁷ The participants experienced healing through validation of their identities and validation of their calls to ministry. The congregations provided the space for them to safely explore what it meant to be a lesbian or gay person and called to service in the church. This experience of reconciliation continues to influence the participants to remain in the church and be examples for others in the LGBTQ community.

Prophetic Witnesses

Participants in this study feel compelled to stay to provide an “example of a gay leader in the church.” The participants are living in the hope that they are accurately predicting a future that includes LGBTQ leaders in the church, that is, living

²⁵⁷ Warner, *Church of Our Own*, 160.

prophetically. Although articulated in various ways, six of the seven participants viewed their continuous presence in the UMC as a prophetic witness to change, and saw themselves as change makers through being an example of leadership in the church. Social movements for change occur when there is the perception that something is wrong and “social movements have been struggling for access to the centers of power and for direct political influence.”²⁵⁸ Furthermore, it has been documented that “the path of sociocultural change rarely proceeds in a straight line.”²⁵⁹ Josh’s desire to be a “long-term change maker,” or Robert’s acknowledgment that it is “the church’s craziness [about homosexuality] that fuels me to want to get the message out to people who think they don’t belong” reveals the potential for change coming from the inside of an organization. The impulse to “make sure that LGBT people are included,” as stated by Josh, was a common desire amongst the majority of participants interviewed. By staying in the church as ordained elders, they not only remain as a central, vital force in the midst of the organization, but also, because of their personal and communal experience of transformation in the UMC, live into the reality of having, in the words of Lisa, “a greater responsibility to be a strong, gay leader in the church.”

The participants express that they are demonstrating the reality of belonging in leadership positions within the church, even though the institutional church does not believe they are compatible with Christian teaching. In fact, church leadership positions occupied by lesbian and gay individuals may seem incongruent with the typical views

²⁵⁸ Jay Weinstein, *Social Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 138.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

held by lay people and people in the general public. Practical theologian Katherine Turpin²⁶⁰ leverages Judith Butler's concept of "drag" as social change to describe this phenomenon. She notes that lesbian and gay clergy are "performing an identity that is culturally unintelligible," thus calling "into question the structures that deem it impossible, and thus begin[ing] the process of changing those structures and allowing for a different reality." In other words, although lay people in the United Methodist Church and the people in society as a whole, may not recognize church leadership roles as a place that has been occupied by lesbian and gay individuals, the material reality of lesbian and gay people actually leading church services and activities creates new possibilities for the reality of LGBTQ religious life.

Perhaps a better way to speak of possibilities that are not realized is to discuss them as potentialities. José Esteban Muñoz states that "unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense."²⁶¹ In other words, this mode of nonbeing is a positive quality that is present, for example, lesbian and gay people are good and moral people capable of leading a congregation in creating and sustaining a meaningful community and that are in search of spiritual fulfillment. However, it is imminent, in that it has yet to materialize in the present tense. That is, there are people in society that have not yet experienced openly gay leaders performing leadership roles in

²⁶⁰ Katherine Turpin, "Drag and Other Practices of Unauthorized Leadership," in *Women, Church, and Leadership New Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Jean Miller Schmidt*, ed. Eunjo Mary Kim and Deborah Beth Creamer (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

²⁶¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

their congregations. After all, as Muñoz states, “performance is the kernel of a potentiality.”²⁶² Much like when we pray the Lord’s Prayer and ask “Thy kin-dom come.” We have the hope that such a kin-dom exists, but it has not materialized in a concrete form in our time. Muñoz’s understanding of potentiality is grounded in his understanding of queerness as a

structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present...[queerness is] a performative because it is not simply a being but *a doing for and toward the future* (emphasis added)...queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world...the future is queerness’s domain.²⁶³

In other words, in queerness, there is the ability to dream of other, new ways of being in the world.

Muñoz looks to the events of the Stonewall riots as evidence to what he calls utopian impulses. Queerness through this lens is about futurity and hope. When the drag queens of the Stonewall Inn chose to stand up to the police they shared a utopian impulse, the belief in some other way of existing in the world. The uprising was fueled by the ability to dream and imagine a new world. Muñoz reminds his readers that, “utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward.”²⁶⁴ Muñoz continues,

Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when

²⁶² Ibid, 98-99.

²⁶³ Ibid, 1.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 97.

the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be.²⁶⁵

There are many instances of utopian ruptures in the past, that when located, provide motivation to continue imagining new possibilities. The utopian impulses of the past have left traces of hope along the way to the present, even if they are not wholly seen or remembered. Muñoz refers to these traces as ephemera, and more precisely, queer ephemera. Muñoz wants his readers to the “think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.”²⁶⁶ It is by locating these remains of utopian impulses of the past that we are able to illuminate the present and begin to imagine new ways of being that are on the horizon, that lie somewhere in the future, a future that is brimming with hope and possibility.

Hope in Progress

This hope can be heard in the responses from the participants in the study when asked why they stay in the church. When I began the study, I expected to hear how the church is causing pain and trauma to the participants’ faith and existence, but what I found was hope in the church and the hope that the church will begin to include all of God’s children. Michael stated that the progress the church is making, no matter how slow, gives them energy to continue on the journey. Michael is looking forward to the time where there is “no energy spent on hiding or trying to work the system to my advantage or our protection.” In addition, Michael “feels strength and clarity of call to keep at this fight through the connectional community of the reconciling United

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 65.

Methodist movement.” The shared utopian impulses of the reconciling movement and lesbian and gay clergy provide the motivation to continue on to create new possibilities.

The United Methodist Church is adorned with queer ephemera that has gone unrecognized, simply ignored, or been forgotten due to time or necessity. Here, the word “queer” engages Patrick Cheng’s definition of queer as “erasing boundaries...erasing of the boundaries of [all] essentialist categories...not only sexuality and gender identity, but also more fundamental boundaries such as life vs. death, and divine vs. human.”²⁶⁷ The erasing of boundaries manifests when an institution responds to the needs of society. The UMC’s *Book of Discipline* contains a section of “Social Principles” that “while not to be considered church law, are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world.”²⁶⁸ This section states that, “we affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God.”²⁶⁹ If all persons are equally valuable, then the boundaries between gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation should be less visible in the life of the church, and by extension, society.

The UMC’s website even contains an “Advocating for Justice” page that states, “the United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Wesley and the early Methodists expressed their opposition to societal ills such as slavery,

²⁶⁷ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 10.

²⁶⁸ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 105.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 119.

smuggling, inhumane prison conditions, alcohol abuse, and child labor.”²⁷⁰ From the clergy and congregational engagement with the civil rights movement²⁷¹ to current ongoing commitments to alleviate the threats on immigrants in the U.S., the UMC’s tradition is enriched with many examples of the church responding to the needs of society. For example, UMC congregations, such as, Park Hill UMC in Denver, Colorado and Clifton UMC in Cincinnati, Ohio, are becoming places of sanctuary for immigrants threatened with deportation.²⁷²

Another example illuminating the traces of imagining new possibilities in God’s kin-dom can be seen in the inclusion of women in the roles of clergy leadership in the UMC. Turpin states that “Wesley affirm[ed] the strong capability of women speakers, and [found] a way for them to serve even as he [could] not yet recognize the category of woman preacher as legitimate.”²⁷³ Thus, leaving a trace of the ability to begin imagining new possibilities in ministry.

It is the living tradition of the UMC engaging with society’s needs that is foundational to its past, vital in the present, and breathes hope into the future. Some of the participants grew up in the UMC, Robert came to the church through invitation from

²⁷⁰ The United Methodist Church, *Advocating for Justice*, January 1, 2019, <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/advocating-for-justice> (accessed January 8, 2019).

²⁷¹ Carter Dalton Lyon, *Easter in Jackson, Mississippi, 1964*, January 1, 2011, <http://archives.gcah.org/handle/10516/1386> (accessed January 8, 2019).

²⁷² Sam Hodges, *Sanctuary as More Than Shelter*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/sanctuary-as-more-than-shelter> (accessed January 8, 2019).

²⁷³ Katherine Turpin, "Drag and Other Practices", 100.

his aunts, and Lisa stated that she “came to the church through forgiveness.” However they came to belong to the church, they have found an institution that through its historic engagement with social issues, has created a matrix of social action which resists racist, sexist, and classist powers.

The UMC has provided “a heritage of resistance...[through] the creation of a matrix of further resistance.”²⁷⁴ It seems the participants in this study are engaging in what Sharon Welch names as “a feminist ethic of risk.”²⁷⁵ The risk is in the letting go of the outcomes for one’s work. Welch states,

the extent to which an action is an appropriate response to the needs of others is constituted as much by the possibilities it creates as by its immediate results. Responsible action does not mean one individual resolving the problems of others. It is, rather, participation in a communal work, laying the groundwork for the creative response of people in the present and in the future. Responsible action provides partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions by others.²⁷⁶

United Methodists, including the participants in this study, have the groundwork of responding to human issues that was created by the United Methodist tradition. We are all part of the communal matrix that “support[s] social climates in which human communities are maintained and strengthened for the sake of all persons and their growth.”²⁷⁷ It is in this matrix where the participants are beginning to see the emergence of new understandings about humanity. In the communities where they have personally

²⁷⁴ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 75.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 110.

felt nurtured and transformed, they continue to work for the church to move toward an affirming stance for the LGBTQ community. They witness hope in progress toward a positive direction when Bishops allow complaints against lesbian and gay clergy go unaddressed. They experience hope in the “love letter to the church” where over one hundred clergy came out just before General Conference. These small progressions have not occurred without backlash from some in the church, but it does provide a reason to be “cautiously optimistic” as Josh shared. The participants do not know what the outcome will be, but they are creating a matrix where others might be nurtured and experience transformation in the midst of the church’s struggles.

In the past, lesbian and gay elders might have been only understood as a possibility, but it is in fact, a potentiality, because lesbian and gay people already know they are equipped for God’s service in the religious community. God’s call in the hearts of people in the LGBTQ community is already in place, it has already happened, even if it hasn’t become a material reality for all people and all congregations. Traces of potentialities hang in the air when lesbian and gay clergy even exist as leaders in the church. Traces of future hope hover above the church in the “gay things” which Michael shared he had included in his spiritual autobiography. Lesbian and gay clergy are creating traces of future hopes and possibilities, traces that are being discovered, materializing, and bubbling up with the hopes of leading to ruptures in the current climate of the United Methodist Church. It is a utopian impulse that drives these participants to stay in the church to “help facilitate long-term change in the church,” and a shared utopian vision of a time and space where god’s kin-dom is on earth as it is in heaven.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The research carried out in this dissertation begins to provide a space for lesbian and gay clergy serving in the United Methodist Church to share their experiences of “call”, living out their call, and service in the church. Other research in the area of LGBTQ+ inclusion and church focused on specific congregations as a whole and how these congregations worked through or talked about full inclusion, or the research examined how organizations engaged the topic at a denominational level. For this reason, I engaged in qualitative research to garner stories directly from the people about whom the rules and strictures are written. My research adds to the conversation by providing stories of lesbian and gay clergy who remain in the church and continue to serve in their capacities as ordained elders in the UMC. The voices of LGBTQ clergy are a crucial factor included in the discussion of how the church responds to the needs and desires of the LGBTQ community. Lesbian and gay clergy’s experiences reveal that the institutional church is not debating an “issue”, but is enacting church law that is affecting actual people’s lives who are created in the image of a loving God who has called them into ministry for God’s purposes.

Just like everyone who is ordained in the United Methodist Church, the participants have written a spiritual autobiography that details evidence of God’s work throughout their lives. The narrative evidence in the spiritual autobiography provides

points of recognition assisting the institutional church in gaining a deeper understanding of the participants. These points of recognition include events, relationships, and activities that the church has historically recognized as God's intervention in daily life. This research provided the space for the participants to share moments of conversions, transformations, and assurances of God's call, in which they are recognized as called by God.

Their calls to ministry are being authenticated as they daily live out their baptismal blessing, and into the spiritual and physical wholeness God is creating them to be. We have seen in this study that the participants understand not only themselves, but also all humanity, to be created and loved by God. There is an understanding that their sexuality is only part of their whole personhood, and that God has called, and more importantly, God's self *knows* the person called to ministry.

Although the participants' calls have been recognized in the form of ordination by the UMC, there are still forced to expend time and energy on negotiating an institution with language that does not affirm LGBTQ people. The language in the *Book of Discipline* and some of the historical teachings of the church also influence how lay members of the UMC regard LGBTQ people and clergy. This study revealed how the participants use special care in the manner in which they exist in the UMC.

Authenticity and integrity are important aspects of ministry and living out one's call. The participants were careful in the language they used to speak their truths, and were judicious in deciding the time and place to reveal more about their identities. This was especially important for those serving in parish ministry.

The study also revealed the decision to serve in extension ministries as a way to negotiate the institutional church. Extension ministries included positions in the nonprofit world or hospital chaplaincy. Opting to serve in these capacities provided a way for the participants to distance themselves from the daily rituals and encounters one experiences in parish ministry. It also kept the institutional church at a more comfortable distance.

The added pressure of “doing good work” was another way of negotiating named by the participants in the study. Even though all clergy might feel the need to do good work, lesbian and gay clergy especially felt that they had to prove themselves. However, they were not proving themselves in order to gain recognition, but to the contrary, some participants felt that if they did their jobs well, assimilating to the clergy culture, then institutional authorities would have no need for close scrutiny of their work, and in turn, their lives.

Presenting one’s self as an acceptable image of a lesbian or gay person has been a tactic for decades in homophile movements.²⁷⁸ The tactic of becoming acceptable, or respectable, “operates within the official sphere,”²⁷⁹ which in this case is the United Methodist Church. Respectability, which is also discussed in African American communities, as well as, queer studies,²⁸⁰ functions as a canceler of difference, and is an

²⁷⁸ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 31.

²⁷⁹ Fredrick C. Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," *Dissent*, 2014: 33-37, 33.

²⁸⁰ Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

“acceptance and internalization”²⁸¹ of the negative statements and beliefs about lesbian and gay people. Respectability is an acceptance of the negative stereotypes of lesbian and gay people by lesbian and gay people, because if the negative beliefs and stereotypes were dismissed, then the need to protect or cover one’s sexual orientation would not be necessary. Although useful as a tool for maintaining a privileged place in the church, respectability tactics contribute to the erasure of a distinctive identity. That is, there is an attempt to distance one’s self from *that* type of person.

However, even though the participants in this study seem to employ tactics in line with respectability politics, they are not denying their identities. I found from the participants a genuine concern for the LGBTQ+ community and not a desire to distance themselves from the outcast other, a group with whom they could identify. Instead, the participants were motivated to navigate the institutional church in order to open pathways for the church to embrace more of the LGBTQ+ community. The participants are not working for acceptance into a community for the sake of becoming a member of a privileged group. The participants are motivated by the theological belief that God’s love is available to all and the church should be a manifestation of a community that experiences God’s ever-expanding love, which includes LGBTQ+ people.

In addition to these tactics utilized by the participants, cultural changes have also helped in how lesbian and gay clergy are viewed in the life of the church. As society’s understanding of human sexuality evolves, so do the views of members of the Christian community. Other mainline Christian denominations have already changed their

²⁸¹ Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Sage Publications), March 2000: 28-40, 34.

statements about the lives of members in the LGBTQ community into affirming stances. The UMC undoubtedly feels the pressure to examine its heritage of responding to the needs of society in order to remain relevant in today's world.

The UMC's responses, although thus far have been exceedingly slow and predominately subtle, have provided a glimmer of hope for the some of the participants in this study. Existence of hope is one of the factors they state for why they are staying in the denomination. The participants experienced the United Methodist Church as a place where they received spiritual care during times of loss, a place for transformation, and a place where they were nurtured and experienced spiritual growth. All of these events contribute to a continuing profound connection to the church, and a responsibility to respond to God's call and show others that there is a place for them in the church.

Participants were able to share their stories about responding to a call on their lives and service in the church. Although they are recognized as suitable candidates for ministry, affirmed by their ordination as elders, at the same time, they are in constant state of proving themselves as legitimate bearers of that call. As long as the incompatible language exists in the *Book of Discipline*, lesbian and gay pastors will have to spend a portion of their time negotiating within the institutional church. Although changing language does not change hearts, it would open space for lesbian and gay clergy to exist in the church without the fear of being delegitimized by the very institution in which they are called to serve. In addition, it would assist lesbian and gay clergy to not spend their time on negotiating the system for their own survival and focus on the importance of ministering to the members of their congregation.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the participants for this research shared richly textured and nuanced narratives of their experiences, this research could be improved with a larger sample population. It is impossible to know the actual number of queer ordained elders serving in the United Methodist Church. Finding participants is reliant on people willing to come out to the researcher and share their experiences serving in the religious community. A larger sample would also increase the geographical diversity for the research. The United Methodist Church has a variety of theological and religious commitments, and these commitments typically differ depending on the geographical location. For example, the congregations along the East and West coasts might lean toward theologically progressive views, and the Midwest might have more conservative views. LGBTQ clergy would have different experiences and different views in the various locations.

In addition, expanding the population to include ordained deacons would potentially provide a larger sample. In the “love letter to the church,” over 120 people signed the letter and a number of the signatories were ordained deacons in the UMC. Deacons are not granted sacramental privileges in the church. That is, “deacons are called by God to a lifetime of servant leadership, authorized by the church, and ordained by a bishop.”²⁸² In other words, deacons are called to service in the world, but are not authorized to preside over baptism or Holy Communion.

Expanding the definitional boundaries of the sample population would also assist in finding a more diverse sample population. For this study there were 2 females and 5 males, all who identified as Caucasian. The inclusion of lesbian and gay people of color

²⁸² The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline 2016*, 253.

would allow for an extensive exploration into the role race plays in negotiating the institutional church. An assumption of this line of inquiry is that white privilege assists in the participants' ability to maneuver through the institution.

Additionally, expanding the participants with more lesbian women would allow a discussion of male advantage in the church. The ability to have a larger pool of women's voices would illuminate the additional obstacles women need to negotiate to remain present in the institution. Working with a more diverse group would deepen the intersectional discussion and understandings of serving in the United Methodist Church.

A future study might explore the effects of sharing stories with each other, specifically in the institution that is the United Methodist Church. This type of inquiry would expand the conversation on living in community and cultural change. As previously discussed, there was a motion to enact "Rule 44" at the General Conference in 2016. This rule was a way for the large general conference to discuss in small groups the petitions brought forward at the conference. Some attendees of the General Conference view Rule 44 as a positive way to discuss especially issues around sexuality.²⁸³ However, as shown earlier in this project, it failed to pass and become a new way to discuss issues in the church. Why were so many people against enacting such a rule? Why would hearing someone's theological convictions in a small group setting be so bad? Why did the participants in this study desire to be able to share their stories? As Mary said "we've got to be able to tell our stories." Exploring these questions would be fruitful for further discussion as the church moves with God's continuing creation.

²⁸³ The United Methodist Church, "General Conference 2016: Benefits of Rule 44," www.umc.org, January 1, 2019, <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference-2016-benefits-of-rule-44> (accessed January 10, 2019).

Additionally, a future study that expands the pool of gathered stories to include a more diverse population would profoundly deepen the discussion and extend the research presented here. Adding more lesbian women's voices and the voices of queer people of color would add a layer of complexity to the study. Furthermore, broadening the scope of the population to include more queer people, beyond the labels of lesbian and gay, would also provide more conversation partners and add to the documentation of queer people in ministry. In turn, diversity would permit a more complex discussion of the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and religion.

Implications for the Church Community

The findings of this study document the experiences of lesbian and gay ordained elders and works to substantiate claims of their compatibility with leadership roles in the church. The implications of providing the space for lesbian and gay elders to share their stories include an unveiling of a reality deemed a potentiality for some and an impossibility for others. The identities of lesbian and gay elders in the United Methodist Church are now possible because their stories reveal the reality of their physical existence in the present. This reality humanizes an oppressed community in the UMC. Lesbian and gay clergy embody a formerly unintelligible identity that is now a cultural reality.

Moreover, the continuing efforts of the church to either completely exclude, or at least keep closeted, lesbian and gay clergy comes at a cost to both the closeted individual and the church community. The lesbian or gay clergy person spends a portion of their time negotiating their identity in the church and the wider community. This is time that could be spent on ministering with the local church, community outreach, and other ministering opportunities.

Additionally, the demand to remain in the closet inhibits the full revelation of one's spiritual journey, which in turn perpetuates a limited understanding of God's creative work in the world. It is true that in writing a spiritual autobiography for a particular audience there are always details that one chooses to omit. However, for lesbian and clergy, the omission of facts about their sexuality changes significant details of moments of conversion. For example, Michael shared that when he was young he felt like garbage, but he had this moment when he fully understood that God loved him and did not think he was garbage. However, what Michael did not write in his spiritual autobiography was that he felt that his sexuality was garbage. This detail changes the understanding of this moment of conversion. A second example shared in this study, was Robert's story of not attending church for a period of time and then beginning to attend by invitation of his aunt. The detail Robert left out was that he stopped attending church because of his sexuality and that it was his lesbian aunt and her partner that invited him to church beginning his reconciliation with the church. Sexuality is an important detail in one's call story. Sexuality changes the nature of the signposts along a spiritual journey, thus becoming ontologically linked to an understanding God's love and call on an individual's life.

Finally, this research provides an example of how the spiritual and religious resources formed in the institutional church are deployed in the lives of clergy and the larger church community in everyday lives. These spiritual and religious resources are not stagnant, fixed ideologies, but are alive with possibilities as they move through the permeable boundaries of social life. For example, when the participants initially wrote their spiritual autobiographies for the candidacy process, they were not "merely accounts;

they also shape[d] reality.”²⁸⁴ These accounts helped them to identify with and claim membership in a particular religious community, the UMC. The UMC helped shape their theological understandings, for example, they are beloved children of God, which the participants carry with them into all aspects and areas of their lives. Their religious identity as United Methodists and beloved children of God operate in their daily lives. As lesbian and gay clergy engage with their extended communities, or spiritual tribes, and share their theological understandings formed by the larger church community, they are co-creating a new way of being that is still connected to the larger community. Even though the larger church maintains its official exclusionary stances against the LGBTQ+ community, there are UMC congregations that offer hope and place for LGBTQ+ people to maintain their spiritual and religious connection. Also, these communities tend to support lesbian and gay clergy and the hope that the UMC will one day become a more welcoming denomination.

As the potentialities of new ways of being in the world begin to materialize, the United Methodist Church is forced to reckon with its past and how it will move forward as a denomination and as a community. During the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, the voices of LGBT members and their allies grew louder, but were in a sense silenced, when the institutional church decided to delay any decision on changing the language in the *Book of Discipline* that states that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. The Council of Bishops decided to form a group consisting of bishops, clergy, and laity, called the Commission on a Way Forward, charged with

²⁸⁴ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 293.

creating models of how the church could move forward with the issues surrounding homosexuality and United Methodist Church. A special session of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church was scheduled for February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri, to act on the models the commission presented following the General Conference.

Reactions to the decision across the denomination are varied. The progressive side, particularly the group, Love Prevails, is critiquing the Commission's exclusion of LGBTQ people on the committee. Some of the conservative members of the denomination formed the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA). The group's website states that it "affirms the work of other renewal groups, such as The Confessing Movement, Good News, and UM Action. However, the WCA's purpose is not to fight the political battles raging across the church, but to prepare for and live into positive and fruitful future."²⁸⁵ It is their belief that through upholding inerrant views of the Bible and their idea of orthodoxy, they are rising above the political discussions and preparing for a future that maintains the antiquated views of human sexuality. Comments on The Evangelical Fellowship of the West Ohio Conference's Facebook page, which loyally follows the Wesleyan Covenant Association, reveal how they view the church as allowing sin to enter the church by considering LGBTQ people as children of God. There are also comments about the church

²⁸⁵ Wesleyan Covenant Association, *Wesleyan Covenant Association*, January 1, 2018, <https://wesleyancovenant.org/about-page/> (accessed August 9, 2018).

falling into “worldly turmoil”.²⁸⁶ The labeling of movements for LGBTQ inclusion as a worldly concern is easily read as a reaction against a progressive worldview.

Theologian Mark Chaves argues that in regards to ordination of women, that

contrary to both the official ideology of these denominations and the popular understanding of them, resistance to women’s ordination is not a necessary outcome of either biblical inerrancy and sacramentalism. The fusion of inerrancy and sacramentalism with resistance to women’s ordination is more cultural achievement than logical necessity.²⁸⁷

His argument is that these views are a result of the desire to create and establish religious organizations and “carve out and sustain religious worlds that are not liberal.”²⁸⁸ This antiliberal identity²⁸⁹ thesis is easily applied to the LGBTQ debate currently disrupting the United Methodist Church. Just as Chaves argues that the ordination of women “became identified with liberalism...it became a target for fundamentalist attack,”²⁹⁰ the same argument can be made for the issues surrounding the ordination of lesbian and gay people in the United Methodist Church. The resistance to inclusion of the LGBTQ community can be seen in the conservative groups battering down the hatches and clinging to their version of orthodoxy.

²⁸⁶ Evangelical Fellowship of the West Ohio Conference's Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/efwoc/> (accessed August 9, 2018).

²⁸⁷ Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 90.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 112.

At the special-called General Conference in February the debate continued with organizations within the church proclaiming their stances. In January, a letter that was unanimously approved by the “presidents and representatives of United Methodist colleges and universities across the U.S. urg[ed] United Methodist General Conference delegates to follow an inclusive path as they chart the future of the church.”²⁹¹ Even with statements like this, no one could predict the direction the church would choose.

Three plans were presented at the special-called general conference. The simple plan was a plan that removed from the *Discipline*, all prohibitions against homosexuality. However, there did not seem to be a lot of support for this plan. There seemed to be wide support by the centrists in the denomination for the “one church plan.” This plan would allow individual congregations to make decisions about inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community based on the context in which they ministered. The WCA and other conservatives supported the third plan, the “modified traditional plan.” The modified traditional plan not only maintained the current language in the *Discipline*, but also added stricter, punitive language regarding members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies. Love Prevails and a fraction of other progressives did not support any of the plans, believing that none of the plans went far enough to satisfy the demands of justice for the LGBTQ+ community.

Ultimately, the modified traditional plan passed with a vote of 438 yes and 384 no. This appeared to be a losing situation for the LGBTQ+ community, their allies, and

²⁹¹ The United Methodist Church, “Methodist University Leaders Call for Broad Ecclesiastical Support of LGBTQ Community,” *www.gbhem.org*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.gbhem.org/article/methodist-university-leaders-call-broad-ecclesiastical-support-lgbtq-community> (accessed January 10, 2019).

the centrists and progressives in the denomination. However, there are many factors that will ultimately determine the actual direction the church will take in the future. One of those factors is belief that the traditional plan contains some elements that will be ruled unconstitutional according to the UMC's constitution and therefore will not be implemented. Another factor, is that this vote caused a number of congregations to become more vocal in their support of an inclusive church. If the posts on social media sites supporting a more inclusive church is any indication, the "traditionalists" have stirred up quite a response from a number of U.S. congregations that will not be easy for the denomination to ignore.

The one thing to remember in all these debates, and as the church struggles to move forward, is that there are real people affected by these conversations and decisions. There are LGBTQ lay members of the UMC, not seeking ordination or desiring leadership roles in the church, who are hearing and witnessing the behavior of the church in regard to these matters. The effects of discussions surrounding inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the church extend far beyond people who seek ordination. People are witnessing the exclusionary tactics of the institutional church. The ambition of this study has been to provide space for the voices of the lesbian and gay clergy to share their experiences of being called into ministry and living out this call in a religious institution that says they are incompatible with Christian teaching. The participants in this study exemplify hope, hope in the future, hope in the church, and hope that God's will prevail. As one participant stated, "I wouldn't still be here if I didn't think the church was going to eventually get it right. I believe we will get it right." There is hope

for future where all people are included. The hope for a new order is on the horizon. The Spirit hovers over the church, waiting for the church to get it right.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Age range
2. Gender identity
3. Orientation identity
4. Degree of being out in various communities in which you engage
5. Race/ethnicity
6. I would really like to hear your spiritual autobiography, the story of how your journey has led you to this point in your life.

Probes

- a. What is your religious/spiritual background? Childhood?
- b. (if not covered in the religious background...) how long have you been a member of the United Methodist Church?
- c. Would you share with me about how you came to be an ordained elder in the UMC? What was that time in your life like?
- d. Has the UMC's stance on homosexuality affected your understanding of your ministry?
- e. Has the UMC's understanding of homosexuality affected how you live out your ministry?
- f. Can you share with me places in your life where membership in the UMC and your identity and theology clash, are congruent or incongruent, or there is tension? Where do you feel at home or no tension?
- g. Although you feel "called" into ministry and the UMC Board of Ordained Ministry has affirmed this call, by requiring that you abide by what is essentially a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, how does this affect your understanding of your role as a clergy person in the UMC?
- h. Given the difficulties you have named (if any have been named), what keeps you in the UMC? (why are you still a clergy person in the UMC?)
- i. Have you ever considered leaving the denomination?
- j. What would you want people to know about what it's like to be a person who both identifies as GLBT and UMC clergy at this point in history?
- k. Where have you felt like you can be fully honest about who you are in the practice of ministry, and where have you felt like you had to be careful or measured in what you reveal about yourself?

How do you negotiate these kinds of varying disclosures?