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By: Megan E. Gandy, **Denise L. Levy**, and Anthony P. Natale

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LGBTQ + people seeking a faith community home: Implications for social workers and allied helping professionals

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ + people experience protective benefits from faith community participation, although some also experience minority stress from rejection and discrimination. Social workers, counselors, psychologists, nurse practitioners, and others can assist LGBTQ + people in looking for a faith community that fits their needs and desires. This study reveals how LGBTQ + people in this sample, most of whom identify as Christians, decided to attend their current faith community through an analysis methodology called Sort and Sift Think and Shift. Four contrasting themes were identified: welcoming versus inclusive, racial/ethnic versus LGBTQ+, inward versus outward, and role modeling versus blending. The authors explore the implications of these themes for helping professionals.

KEYWORDS

Gay; lesbian; bisexual; transgender; queer; church; religion; integration

Introduction and background

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) individuals identify as religious or spiritual. 5.3 million LGBTQ + adults in the United States, or approximately half of all LGBTQ + adults, identify as religious (Conron et al., 2020). Almost 20% of LGBTQ + adults identify as highly religious; they attend religious services weekly and say that religion is an integral part of their daily lives (Conron et al., 2020). LGBTQ + individuals who are looking for a faith community may find diverse groups with a variety of beliefs about sexual and gender identity, and it may not be clear from the outside if a particular group is affirming. In fact, some religious organizations discriminate against LGBTQ + individuals, and religious people are less likely to accept sexual and gender minorities (Connaughton, 2020; Smith, 2017). This institutional

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discrimination leads to experiences of stress, internalized homophobia or transphobia, and fear of rejection, as described in the minority stress model (Meyer, 1995). Still, many LGBTQ+ individuals continue to participate in faith communities with a wide range of beliefs about sexuality and gender. In order to better understand why they choose their religious organizations and faith communities, it is first important to understand the various categories of congregations and the beliefs they have about LGBTQ+ populations.

Christian denominations have various policies and beliefs about LGBTQ+ individuals and their inclusion in congregations (Levy, 2014). Harris et al. (2021) described four types of congregations: traditionalist, welcoming, affirming, and reconciling. Traditionalist communities believe that intimacy should be between a married man and a woman, welcoming communities invite all to attend but do not outwardly support same-sex behavior, affirming communities advocate for acceptance of marriage equality and inclusion of same-sex couples in their congregations, and reconciling communities seek social justice for LGBTQ+ individuals (Harris et al., 2021; Stephens, 2018). Some faith communities seek ways to let LGBTQ+ individuals know that they are affirming, particularly given the history of discrimination against these individuals by some religious organizations. For example, the United Church of Christ has developed an Open and Affirming program where congregations can be designated so long as they create and publicize a statement that welcomes LGBTQ+ individuals into their church (Scheitle et al., 2010). Other Christian denominations have similar programs or designations, and requirements vary.

Faith communities, like individuals, do not always remain static in their beliefs. Congregations may go through a painful process of moving from one type of congregation to another. For example, over fifty years, the Presbyterian Church (USA) moved from a stance that same-sex behaviors were sinful to celebrating and including LGBTQ+ individuals as full church members (Wilkinson, 2020). Unfortunately, this process sometimes results in losing members or, as recently happened with a former United Methodist Church in Georgia, splitting with an affiliated denomination (Hahn, 2020). Further, some groups, such as the United Federation of Metropolitan Community Churches (n.d.), have been formed to support LGBTQ+ Christians specifically and to support civil and human rights.

LGBTQ+ people of faith can be found in all of these congregations—from traditionalists to reconciling. But why do they choose their particular congregations, and what factors are important to them in making these choices? For those who participate in more affirming churches, these congregations offer personal healing and opportunities to engage in activism and social justice work (White et al., 2020). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found that gay-positive churches are critical to integrating gay and religious



identities for their members. In addition, Lease and colleagues' (2005) study with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who participated in affirming congregations showed they were more likely to be spiritual and less likely to believe in homonegative messages, resulting in better psychological health. However, even in more affirming churches, some LGBTQ+ people may still minimize their sexuality or gender identity to be a so-called good Christian (McQueeney, 2009); and heteronormative, cisnormative, and patriarchal structures may still be present in affirming communities (Sumerau et al., 2015).

There is less information about why LGBTQ+ individuals might choose to participate in congregations that are not affirming, though the existing literature does provide some information. In a study with Black sexual minority men, White et al. (2020) found that some prefer participating in more traditionalist churches despite the anti-gay stigma then had to negotiate in these settings. These churches provide the traditions and rituals they were raised with and offer a broader conceptualization of religion or spirituality, compared with the focus on LGBTQ+ identities found in some affirming congregations (Levy, 2011; White et al., 2020). In other research with Black gay men, Pitt (2010a, 2010b) found that individuals negotiated homophobic and transphobic rhetoric by compartmentalizing their identities as LGBTQ+ or religious without integrating the two, minimizing their LGBTQ+ identities, or setting aside negative messages about same-sex sexuality and instead identifying the messenger as illegitimate. This research provides some background for why individuals might participate in more traditional congregations, but tends to focus more on the experiences of Black gay men rather than broader groups of LGBTQ+ individuals. More research is needed to better understand why individuals decide to participate in these types of congregations.

To understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of faith in church communities, it is essential to recognize the significance of racial and cultural intersections. For many people of color, faith communities provide an outlet for social and emotional support and a forum for social justice issues. Black LGBTQ+ adults are more likely to be religious than other LGBTQ+ adults (Conron et al., 2020). The Pew Research Center reports that 60% of Black adults who attend religious services attend most or all Black congregations (Mohamed et al., 2021). However, LGBTQ+ people of color are often invisible within the Black church, where homonegativity and heterosexism are the norms (Chaney & Patrick, 2011; Pitt, 2010a, 2010b; Quinn et al., 2016). Despite this, many LGBTQ+ people of color remain in their traditional Black churches because of their strong connections with their families and communities, even if this means concealing their sexuality or gender identity (Pitt, 2010b; Quinn et al., 2016; White et al., 2020). Some even serve as community



leaders (Pitt, 2010b). Although some have tried attending more affirming congregations, they returned to their traditional churches because they found those communities a better fit with their values and were more diverse than the predominately white, affirming churches (Pitt, 2010b). Barbosa et al. (2010) described similar experiences for Latinx LGBTQ + individuals who are Catholic. Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ + people of color who are religious requires an intersectional approach and a critical examination of how these different identities intersect with one another and how they impact individuals' choices about their faith communities.

In summary, there are various reasons why LGBTQ + people of faith choose and stay in their congregations. Some prefer more traditional churches reminiscent of their upbringing, where they have strong family and community ties. Others prefer more affirming churches where they find healing solidarity, integrate their identities, and advocate for social justice. For LGBTQ + people of color, intersecting identities bring even more complexities to their decisions. Most of the studies reviewed here focus on specific subsets of the LGBTQ + population, and more information is needed to fully understand the nuances of religious participation. To advance the literature, the authors explored why LGBTQ + people of faith chose their current faith communities.

Methods

The researchers collected data in 2016 as part of a more extensive examination of LGBTQ + people in faith communities. This paper presents a portion of results from that study that are relevant to the process that participants went through to find their faith community home. Recruitment occurred at a large national conference of LGBTQ + Christians called the Queer Christian Fellowship (formerly known as the Gay Christian Network). Participants entered a recruitment pool from which the researchers selected a purposeful sample from typically underrepresented groups such as racial minorities, disclosure status of LGBTQ + identity, geographic region and population density, education level, poverty status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Semi-structured phone interviews occurred with 30 participants from that pool. The majority demographic groups were as follows: 50% White, 36% cisgender woman, 40% gay or lesbian, 60% between the ages of 18–35 (range 18–64), 40% held a graduate degree, 60% income did not fall below the poverty line, 43% lived in a metropolitan area (with a population greater than 50,000), 56% disclosed their LGBTQ + identity in every setting including church, and 91% identified with a Christian-based religion. The complete demographics were published elsewhere and can be found at Gandy et al. (2021).



The interview questions focused on themes as to why participants stayed in their faith communities, such as “tell me about your church or faith community and what draws you to attend,” “what activities do you participate in your faith community,” and “describe a time you struggled with personal or family problems as a result of your coming out that your faith community helped you through,” and “how does your faith community respond to your LGBTQ+ identity?” The complete interview guide was published elsewhere and can be found at Gandy et al. (2021).

Phenomenological data analysis ensued using *in vivo* coding to retain meaning at the individual level of data. Phenomenology offers researchers the opportunity to explore the meaning of social phenomena by describing the essential qualities of that phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016). We sought to describe why the LGBTQ+ people in this study choose their faith community. The use of *in vivo* coding, where the actual phrases or sentences of participants are used as codes instead of one or two word summary codes, allowed the researchers to stay close to the individual-level data for analysis rather than abstracting the individual-level data, which puts distance between the researcher and the individual-level meaning.

The research followed the methods of Maietta (2006) called “Sort and Sift, Think and Shift,” which involves several iterative cycles of digging into the data at the individual level and then stepping back from the data to contextualize personal data with others at the study level. This is completed by first combing through each piece of individual-level data (in this case, interview transcripts) and identifying prominent themes. Then, after the individual-level data is coded, the researcher steps back and identifies salient themes from across the data. This is the “sort and sift” aspect of the analysis. Then, after these salient themes are identified, the researcher steps back and performs the “think and shift” stage of the analysis. This is when the researcher identifies the overall story that the salient themes are telling. The sort and sift and think and shift stages occur in many cycles until the researcher has a comprehensible story to tell. It is cross-checked by an auditor who reviews the raw, individual-level data, any memos created along the way, and the codes, and judges the degree to which the final analysis has captured the meaning held in each individual story. In this study, two researchers analyzed the data at separate times. Then, the researchers met to discuss and compare their findings until they reached a consensus on the major themes. A third outside auditor reviewed the raw transcripts and final themes for trustworthiness and authenticity. The researchers bracketed their previously held assumptions by memoing during and after each individual-level analysis to help reduce the bias in the meaning-making of the themes.

Positionality is an important aspect of qualitative inquiry that situates the analysis in the context of the positions that the researchers hold. This



increases rigor of qualitative inquiry by instilling trustworthiness of the analysis (Rodwell, 1998). In this study, it is important to identify the position of the researchers in regards to gender identity, sexual orientation, social work, and faith background. Two authors identify in the LGBTQ+ community, and one identifies as an ally to the community. All three authors identify as cisgender. One author has significant past experience in fundamentalist, evangelical Christianity; the other two have personal family histories in mainline Christianity. None of the authors currently practice an organized religion. All three authors have social work practice experience as licensed practitioners and are all currently employed as faculty members at large, research-focused institutions. During the research process, the authors used memoing to bracket their own positionality, and an auditing process helped to keep the positions of the authors in check with the intent of the analysis.

The Institutional Review Board approved this study's human subjects methods of [institution redacted for anonymity] under protocol # 6227. Participants gave informed consent before agreeing to be in the study and were given a copy of the information to keep.

Results

The analysis led to four fluid themes. The themes are named by contrasts (this versus that) to illustrate the choices faced by these participants. This contrast resulted from the participant stories of a linear progression where they described what it was like before they found their current faith community, and why they chose their current faith community. Together, these themes make up an understanding of factors considered by LGBTQ+ people to find their faith community home. Participant quotes are shared along with identity labels to help further contextualize their meaning. All participant names were changed to pseudonyms to help protect their anonymity. [Table 1](#) presents the themes as a visual aid for the reader.

Theme 1: Welcoming versus inclusion

Participants spoke about the difference between a faith community that tolerated LGBTQ+ people (considered welcoming but not affirming) versus a community that fully embraced and affirmed LGBTQ+ people (considered affirming or inclusive). The distinction between welcoming and inclusive was a personal experience and did not always align with a declarative statement by a faith community. Even a faith community that declared itself as welcoming did not take actions that demonstrated its



Table 1. Themes and descriptions.

Theme name	Description
Welcoming vs Inclusion	Represents the difference between a faith community that tolerates LGBTQ + people (considered welcoming but not affirming) versus a community that fully embraces and affirms LGBTQ + people (considered affirming/inclusive).
Racial/Ethnic vs LGBTQ+	Describes what participants seek from a faith community that may not meet their multiple, intersecting identity-based needs. Participants choose between a faith community focused on racial or ethnic identity, or a faith community focused on LGBTQ + inclusion. Rarely were there opportunities for both.
Inward-Focused vs Outward Focused	A faith community is focused either on inward specifics of their faith practice such as theology or church governance, or on forces external to the faith community such as political and social justice issues. There was a distinct discussion among participants about how these two foci influenced their faith community decision.
Role Modeling vs Blending	How participants integrate their LGBTQ + identities in the faith community environment. Some wanted to be in a leadership role, while others simply wanted to be a member of the faith community with few or no leadership duties.

inclusivity, thus making it seem far less than affirming. Sometimes the distinction was intuitive over time rather than a single, standalone incident. In contrast, a genuinely inclusive community was not demeaning or discriminatory against LGBTQ + people, whether they made a declarative affirming statement or allowed LGBTQ + people to participate in every aspect of congregational life.

Welcoming

Percy, an African American, gay, cisgender man living in a rural area, the congregation's pastor, did not disclose his sexuality to his community for fear of losing his job. However, he attempted to send the message of being a welcoming place for all through his sermons, stating, "I have talked about the importance about being inclusive and how Jesus loves everybody straight, gay, black, white, you know, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, uneducated you know and I have never to date gotten any flax about mentioning LGBT people."

Lee, a biracial Asian and White, gay, cisgender man living in a suburban area, described his reasoning for attending a faith community that was not affirming as a decision to separate his spiritual needs from his other needs. "my therapist said, listen you go to church, you take what you want from it and leave the rest. That's it. So, I don't care what their doctrine is. If I want to go to this church, I'll just go as long as they're not horrible." Lee chose to stay in his faith community because it connected him to his family of origin, who are all Catholic.

Some participants had the experience of initially thinking a faith community was inclusive but later found out it was not, which contributed to why some LGBTQ + people had difficulty trusting faith community leadership.



For example, Marisol, a White, queer, cisgender woman living in a rural area, said, “‘everyone’s welcome’ doesn’t mean anything because half the places that say, ‘Everyone’s Welcome,’ I will be told I’m eternally damned to hell.”

Participants sometimes found that after experiencing a welcoming but not inclusive environment, the affirmation of their identity was more important than they first thought. This prompted them to leave and find another community. For example, Michelle, an African-American, bisexual, cisgender woman living in a suburban area, shared, “It started to become more important to me where I started realizing how big of a concept it was to not be in a place that is affirming. Could I still be in that church that wasn’t affirming? Yeah, but I realize how much I’d have to sacrifice.” Michelle further illustrated the difference between welcoming and inclusive, saying, “It’s one thing to be able to attend but to participate fully and be a welcomed person in the community, it’s a whole different story.”

Inclusive

Having a community where the participant could be a fully included member was essential to many. For example, Tobi, a White, bisexual, transgender man living in a metropolitan area, stated, “if you aren’t in a place that’s safe to open up, you miss out on some of the best parts about being part of a faith community.”

How people determined community inclusivity varied among the participants. Sometimes, inclusivity was a trait that participants experienced over time rather than just in a single incident. It was a very intuitive experience; as Sophia, a White, lesbian, transgender woman living in a metropolitan area, illustrates, “I have not seen anything publicly. It’s more private because of where they are in the community and where we are in the country. I think that they do things privately as they’ve done with me... I just know that they’re accepting. But, I’ve not seen any formal efforts on their part.” Sometimes, faith communities had to keep their affirming status under a need-to-know basis due to politics within their denominational structure. As Olivia, a White, lesbian, transgender woman living in a metropolitan area, described, “politically, it is not in their best interest to broadcast that they’re an affirming place. Since I’m not on staff or anything, they have kind of looked the other way. There’s been some quiet conversations and encouragement to get the word out that there is an affirming church.” Olivia described an LGBTQ+ affirming program within their denomination and how they became a leader for a chapter they started at their church even though it was not openly affirming. The church wanted to have the chapter based there because of the message it



would send to other LGBTQ+ people about their status as an affirming congregation.

Others extensively researched and determined the amount of inclusion of a faith community before visiting. At times participants would use a website or word of mouth for clues and information or even contact the faith community directly to ask if they were fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ people (e.g., allowed to serve in leadership, lead worship, teach Sunday school, etc.). Michelle gave an excellent example of this, stating, “I started Googling different churches and looking at different articles, looking at faith statements and came across [Name of Church], which was a large evangelical church that made a public statement on LGBT community and being inclusive of all people, not just LGBT people. So when I read that, I was kind of interested and started attending when I moved there.”

Sometimes it was being affirmed that gave them the message. Some got the inclusive message through individual experiences, like Austin, a White, gay, cisgender man living in a rural area, “The first day I was there, I was nervous, and the first guy I met, I said, ‘I’m gay. I hope there’s a place for me here.’ He hugged me and said, ‘I’m gay, too. I promise if they kick you out, they kick me out.’” For others, it was an obvious statement or event from the church that didn’t have anything to do with that individual; as Cayden, a White, queer, transgender man living in a metropolitan area, illustrates, “that church a couple of years ago hosted the interfaith pride service during Pride Week.” Cayden demonstrates the distinction between welcoming and inclusive by saying, “it has to be a church that is not just queer-friendly and sort of an abstract welcoming way but in an active, intentional way. I am not interested in just being welcomed into someone else’s space, I want it to be equally my space, and that is a really big difference.”

Many participants shared the joy of being in an inclusive community. Some participants had a wonderfully inclusive experience despite a faith community having no outward signs or declarations of being inclusive, and this furthered their devotion to staying in that community. Jasper, a white, pansexual, transgender man living in a metropolitan area, shared that “to have all of those people behind me reaffirming my faith was a really much-needed thing that I didn’t know I was going to have.”

Theme 2: Racial/ethnic versus LGBTQ+

Many participants had multiple intersecting identities that impacted what they sought from a faith community. The most distinct intersection was race and/or ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity, and being a person of faith, which participants described as a unique tension. Some had to come to terms



with faith communities that did not meet all their identity-based needs. For some people of color in the study, being in a faith community aligned with their racial or ethnic identity was more important than being in an affirming environment for their LGBTQ+ identity. Others preferred to be in a LGBTQ+-affirming climate, regardless of the composition of the community's racial and ethnic identities. Because of the multiple identity-based negotiations that people of color in this study had to make, there was an additional burden on them as they navigated the process of finding a faith community.

Racial/ethnic

Participants sometimes placed more importance on their racial or ethnic identity when looking for a faith community to call home. For some, this was after having an experience of leaving or being rejected by the faith community in which they grew up and then finding new faith communities. For Keisha, an African American, bisexual, cisgender woman living in a metropolitan area, this process of seeking out a faith community that fit was challenging, "one of the hardest things about looking for a church was that for the longest time, I felt like I was going to have to choose between attending an affirming, predominantly White church, or a predominantly Black, non-affirming church."

Some participants decided to attend a new faith community different from the predominantly racial or ethnically based type they grew up in. Caihong, an Asian, gay, cisgender man living in a metropolitan area, illustrates this, saying, "I spent part of my childhood in Chinese American churches. In those contexts, there is an over-emphasis on ethnicity, and I never liked that."

However, some people of color preferred a predominantly ethnic or racial faith community and felt a deep connection when they found a faith community that intersected the two categories of their racial or ethnic identity and affirmed their LGBTQ+ identity. For example, Hania, a Native American, gay, cisgender man living in a suburban area, shared, "I related a bit more to both gay and as well as my native identity, and that was the best way that I could bridge them together personally."

Lgbtq+

Some participants of color decided that the emphasis on their racial or ethnic identity was not as crucial as the affirmation of their LGBTQ+ identity. For example, Michelle stated that "me and my fiancé have decided that we could be in a church that wasn't necessarily affirming and that would be okay for us, but since coming to this church, it has become really



important.” Some were able to find comfort in the presence of diverse congregants or leaders, even though the community was not a predominantly ethnic or racial community, such as Jamar, an African American, gay, cisgender man living in a metropolitan area who shared, “in terms of ways that they make me feel a part of things and accepted is just the voice that they offer. Of the co-pastors, one is a female; one is a Filipino. They’re both straight, but they still make sure to speak to the issues that are going on in the LGBT community.”

Some participants were able to find a faith community that met all their identity-based needs. For example, Elena, a Latina, bisexual, cisgender woman living in a metropolitan area, found a faith community that was both ethnically focused and LGBTQ + affirming, “it is a community where both English and Spanish are spoken, and it’s incredibly inclusive and queer-friendly. It’s small; there are only about ten or twelve of us. But we meet at a church and are led by an ordained pastor, and it’s mostly kind of queer-focused.”

Theme 3: Inward-Focused versus outward focused

Some participants wanted a faith community that only focused inwardly on certain specifics of their faith practice, such as theology, church governance, and a distinct avoidance of anything “political” (i.e., social justice causes). Other participants wanted the opposite; they chose a faith community because of its mission to help people in need, seek justice for various reasons, engage in activism, and focus more on parts of their faith that pertained to assisting the downtrodden.

Inward

Participants in this category focused on practicing their faith in their chosen community. Their practice of faith did not involve outreach but instead involved in-reach. There was a distinct focus on studying sacred texts, growing intellectually and spiritually, and giving time and service to maintaining the faith community. Such as Stephen, a White, gay, cisgender man living in a metropolitan area, shared that “I was raised to believe, and I do believe, in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is an essential focus of Christianity. I want a church that believes that and doesn’t spin off in these other weird functions. That is the hard part finding a church that believes both that and is still LGBT affirming.”

Some of these participants spoke explicitly against the idea of a faith community being involved in social justice or politically themed issues, such as Caihong, “I visited a church nearby when I was doing my church



shopping, and there were rainbow flags everywhere, and there were statements about equality and justice, and I just felt like we were worshiping at the altar of social justice rather than worshiping God, and that felt problematic to me.” On the other hand, some just wanted a place to practice their faith. For example, Noah, a White, straight, transgender man living in a rural area, shared, “All we do is promote the teachings of God, and that’s it. We don’t go for the whole political side of things. Which I found refreshing.”

Outward

Some participants wanted a faith community focused on social issues, for example, Cayden, who shared that “both of the churches that I go to are fairly progressive both socially and theologically, social justice-oriented. Both pastors are very involved in the community and act their faith out in terms of action and values and which is very important to me.”

Some reported that the call to activism was a natural part of coming out as an LGBTQ+ person of faith. They felt it was impossible to separate their identity from the causes that impacted them. As a result, they encountered more public interaction about their faith and issues affecting them as an LGBTQ+ person. As for Susan, a White, straight, transgender woman living in a suburban area, “God made me transgender for two reasons. One, he made me transgender; he was testing me to see how I would handle it. And second, because he wanted to see how his Christians would handle it. They’re not real good.”

A participant’s outreach could be toward people who have faced the same problems already. This was giving back to the community that helped them through difficult times. Some felt it was a calling—to serve the down-trodden. Noah shared, “I was able to help somebody that couldn’t help themselves. I have been in that position where I have not been able to help myself, and other people helped me. In ways, I feel like I’m paying that back, and in other ways, I feel like I’m paying it forward.” Some participants, such as Noah, who were interested in outreach, wanted to avoid anything political like social justice but still wanted to serve others. They wanted to help people experiencing homelessness, joblessness, substance abuse issues, and more.

Theme 4: Role modeling versus Blending

This theme explains participants’ different positions about integrating their LGBTQ+ identities in the faith community environment. For example, some wanted or needed to educate others; for some, simply blending in at church was enough.



Role modeling and education

Some desired a specific focus on LGBTQ+ identities as part of the congregation's mission. Often, these people would identify themselves as advocates or educators. They would advocate for better inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in their faith community and take a role modeling position. For example, Sam, a White, gay, genderqueer person living in a rural area, shared, "I've had multiple conversations with my pastor and my youth pastors about heterosexuality and homosexuality and what's in the Bible. Different arguments for and against trying to really just open that conversation up. It gets them thinking about it even when they're not accepting or affirming."

Often, this desire to be an advocate came either because they needed such a role model but not having one in the past or to pass along the benefits they received because of the role models in their lives. For Jasper, he wanted to be the role model that he never had, sharing, "for me, that's kind of my way of giving to the Christian community would be to provide something that I needed that doesn't really exist very much, so they don't have to go through that period in their life that I had to."

Sometimes the desire to advocate would come as a calling because of their faith experience. They felt a spiritual calling to be an advocate, such as Sophia, who shared, "I definitely have a sense of a higher calling. I think he's using me for something. What little voice I have, what little position of privilege I have, I knew I had to be able to use that in some way."

Sometimes the role modeling position was not as much of a choice as it was a necessity. For example, a person who came out as an LGBTQ+ person of faith would be thrust into the forefront of the debate on LGBTQ+ people in faith communities and, therefore, would become an advocate on behalf of their community. This was the case for Jamar, who shared, "once you come out as a gay Christian, you're, like, automatically drafted as an activist. [laughs] You don't sign up for it whether you want to or not. But, if you come out and say, I'm a gay Christian, you are now a part of the movement to advocate for LGBT inclusion in the church."

This theme's education and outreach side relates to how some participants told other LGBTQ+ people about their good experiences in their faith community. They wanted other LGBTQ+ people to have a good experience just like they did but knew from their own experiences that many LGBTQ+ people left faith communities or were shunned by faith communities and did not want to be part of one. Above all else, many participants wanted to get the message out to other LGBTQ+ people that there are faith communities that will not reject them and will fulfill their spiritual needs. For example, Olivia said, "I want to show folks, particularly the trans community because they have been so beat up and abused by



organized religion, that there are places of faith that they can go and be comfortable and feel like they are a part of the community.”

Blending in

Being part of an accepting community was good enough for those in the latter part of the theme, and they did not want any significant focus on their LGBTQ+ identity. For example, attending an affirming church with no special programming or outreach for LGBTQ+ people. These participants did not want to hide their LGBTQ+ identity; they just wanted a focus on the faith community rather than on the LGBTQ+ identity itself. Such as for Marisol, who said, “yes, I want to know I’m welcome, but then the whole conversation for me doesn’t need to be about being queer. I want it to be about other things, too.”

Simultaneously, these participants did not want their LGBTQ+ identity to get in the way of full participation in their faith community. Instead, many participants expressed gratitude for having a faith community they could be fully part of as an LGBTQ+ person without questioning whether or not they belong. Such was the case for Austin, who said, “It doesn’t feel like work going there.”

For some participants, being asked to educate others was a burden and diminished their faith community experience, such as Cayden, who said, “while I am certainly willing to do education, and I have done lots of education both personally and professionally around how to include trans-people in faith communities, I don’t want to have to do that. I don’t want it to be expected of me when I am in a place where I am part of a community and there to receive and give. I don’t want to have to explain myself all of the time.”

As stated in previous themes, some participants wanted to focus on practicing aspects of their faith that did not necessarily integrate their LGBTQ+ identity. Still, they also did not want their LGBTQ+ identity to get in the way of their faith practice, as was the case for those who wanted to find a community that served those experiencing poverty. These participants wanted a faith community where they did not have to fight against homophobia or transphobia to practice their faith.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore why LGBTQ+ people of faith chose their current faith communities. The authors successfully describe the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in selecting a faith community. Participants navigated the complexity of determining whether a faith community is welcoming or inclusive. They dealt with their trust in a faith community when they found out it



was only welcoming and not fully inclusive. Simultaneously, participants of color had to deal with the additional burden of choosing whether to find a community that fit their racial or ethnic identity-based needs or a community that was LGBTQ + inclusive but predominantly white. Because of this, participants of color may have had a less linear experience in their faith community journey than did participants who identified as White. Participants navigated the choice of what they wanted to get out of participation in a faith community, whether that was an inward focus on cultivating their faith practice or an outward focus on serving others and whether there was a focus on social justice issues. Participants weighed the personal benefits and challenges of educating others in their faith community and serving as an advocate for LGBTQ + people versus simply being an ordinary member of a faith community where they could go without having to explain or defend themselves.

Implications for practitioners

For social workers and other allied health professionals who work with LGBT plus people, the need to understand the complexity of determining inclusion and the faith community is a crucial process, as underscored by Scheitle et al. (2010). It is important to note that while faith provides support and comfort to many, it has been a source of discrimination and exclusion for LGBT-plus individuals. With this knowledge, helping professionals can endeavor to better support their clients with resources and information about faith communities where inclusion is centered. Without locating an inclusive faith community, the social worker may be assisting their client and navigating the potential challenges of being a member of a faith community that only partially accepts them. As Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) note, by recognizing the implications of faith and its impact on LGBT + individuals, social workers can play a critical role in supporting their clients' overall well-being and helping to create a more inclusive and accepting society (Scheitle et al., 2010).

Social workers and allied professionals must be aware of the implications when LGBT individuals invest in trust and a faith community but later discover it is not fully inclusive. This can result in significant emotional distress, feelings of betrayal, and additional spiritual trauma, or retraumatization (Lease et al., 2005). In this case, social workers can provide a safe and affirming space to think through strategies to move forward while also processing the emotional experience of faith-based exclusion. Social workers and allied health professionals will be met with success if they can build culturally sensitive and inclusive practices that empower individuals to reconcile their faith with their sexuality in authentic and empowering ways (Lease et al., 2005).



Social workers and allied health professionals must maintain awareness of intersectionality, in particular, that LGBT plus people of color struggles can be intensified by racism. The additional burdens placed upon LGBT + people of color in finding a faith community are well documented (Barnes, 2013; Chaney & Patrick, 2011). LGBTQ + people of color often must choose between a faith community that fits their racial or ethnic identity-based needs versus one that includes LGBTQ + people. However, if a faith community is predominantly White, it can evoke feelings of disconnection and isolation from both communities. Social workers and allied health professionals would be well served to assist their clients with resources and guidance on finding positive communities prioritizing racial and LGBT + inclusivity. Another role social workers can play is to assist individuals in navigating their intersectional identities in ways that will allow them to claim their needs within existing systems.

One role for the social worker and allied professionals may be to navigate what the LGBTQ + individuals hope to achieve through faith community participation. For example, LGBTQ + individuals' unique needs often differ from their non-LGBTQ + peers concerning their faith communities. In the present study, participants noted participation in a spiritual community to foster inward focus by cultivating their faith practice. In contrast, others indicated seeking an outward focus by serving others and participating in social justice issues. Therefore social workers and allied professionals should not assume to know the motivations for participation in a faith community by an LGBTQ + person.

Social workers and other allied health professionals are also well-served to consider the role they may wish to play as an LGBTQ + faith community member (White et al., 2020). For some, their status as an LGBTQ + faith community member is essential as it provides educational moments to assist others' awareness about including LGBTQ + people. On the other hand, some LGBTQ + faith-based community members may wish to have a role in their community that does not center that aspect of their lives. Helping LGBTQ + individuals navigate either decision can assist them in knowing the role they might choose to adopt that aligns with their values and convictions. In addition, by engaging in these conversations, social workers can assist clients seeking faith-based communities to live fulfilling and authentic lives within them (White et al., 2020).

Implications for researchers

The results of this study add to the research literature in several ways. First, the factors presented place items on continuums for consideration by



LGBTQ+ individuals, thereby reflecting the individualist nature of discerning a faith community. Second, this work provides a plausible explanation for the conclusion by White et al. (2020) and Mohamed and colleagues (2020) that LGBTQ+ people choose a traditionalist faith even if it means compartmentalizing their sexual orientation or gender identity (Pitt, 2010a, 2010b). Similarly, some LGBTQ+ racial and ethnic minorities prioritized one aspect of their identity over another. Third, researchers have identified differences between communities that are simply welcoming versus those that are affirming. For instance, Chaney and Patrick (2011) and Barnes (2013) explain that affirming communities acknowledge and include their LGBTQ+ members, whereas welcoming communities may try to erase or hide them. Our findings support that conclusion by revealing several individual determinates as to whether a faith community is interpreted as welcoming or inclusive. Fourth, for some in LGBTQ+ affirming communities, it was essential to be a part of congregations focused on social justice work and to serve as pioneers, mentors, and role models for other gay and lesbian congregants, furthering the evidence (Lease et al., 2005; White et al. 2020) that LGBTQ+ affirming congregations have distinctive features. For them, their faith communities were active in the pursuit of community service, often evident in the faith communities' activities. This aligns with the findings that some individuals are interested in outward-focused congregations and in being role models and educating others which is in line with the results of Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000).

Limitations

While the current study holds several strengths, including its innovative methodology, there are some ways to strengthen this research. Regarding recruitment, it is likely that the participants attending a conference on spirituality among LGBTQ+ people represent only a segment of the perspectives needed to fully understand how LGBTQ+ people discern their faith communities. In addition, since most of the participants identified solely as Christian, further research would benefit from including various faith traditions. As with all qualitative research, member checking during the data collection and analysis portions would have ensured that the researchers adequately captured the perspectives described. Another limitation relates to the age of the data. These data were collected at the end of 2016, and current events have evolved significantly since that time. Readers should interpret these findings with that historical lens. Despite these limitations, this study provides a solid understanding for social workers.



Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate and multifaceted process through which LGBTQ + individuals navigate to their faith community affiliation. The findings reveal a range of experiences, preferences, and considerations that play a pivotal role in their decisions. By delving into the intricate decision-making processes, challenges, and triumphs, this study adds depth to the existing discourse on LGBTQ + experiences and faith. It helps social workers and allied professionals to support their LGBTQ + clients as they navigate the process of finding a faith community to call home.

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