



# **Gay, Lesbian, And Queer Individuals With A Christian Upbringing: Exploring The Process Of Resolving Conflict Between Sexual Identity And Religious Beliefs**

**By: Denise Louise Levy**

## **Abstract**

The role that religious faith plays in individuals' lives can be very important, often providing emotional and social support. However, religious beliefs can come into conflict with other aspects of people's identities, such as sexual orientation. Research to date has focused on the eventual outcomes of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, rather than examining the process by which individuals resolve this conflict. The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. There were four research questions directing this study: (a) how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs? (b) what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict? (c) what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and (d) how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

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GAY, LESBIAN, AND QUEER INDIVIDUALS WITH A CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING:  
EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF RESOLVING CONFLICT BETWEEN SEXUAL  
IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

by

DENISE LOUISE LEVY

(Under the Direction of Patricia Reeves)

ABSTRACT

The role that religious faith plays in individuals' lives can be very important, often providing emotional and social support. However, religious beliefs can come into conflict with other aspects of people's identities, such as sexual orientation. Research to date has focused on the eventual outcomes of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, rather than examining the process by which individuals resolve this conflict. The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. There were four research questions directing this study: (a) how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs? (b) what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict? (c) what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and (d) how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory approach and included in-depth interviews with 15 participants who were selected using maximum variation and theoretical sampling. The sample included gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing, and was diverse in terms of age, gender, religious background, and current faith identification.

Interview transcripts were coded using grounded theory methods of open, focused, and axial coding. Additionally, I utilized the constant comparison technique and memo writing throughout the analytic process. Analysis led to a substantive theory of the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. This process includes an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, steps of working through the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict. The entire process of conflict resolution was affected by two core categories: personal factors of reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor; and contextual factors including family, community resources, and church doctrine.

INDEX WORDS: Gay, Lesbian, Queer, Sexual identity, Homosexuality, Christianity, Religion, Identity, Internal conflict

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who have experienced conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing, particularly my very close friends Dean Allbritton, Brad Barfield, Perry Edwards, and Wesley Whatley. Your resiliency and strength in the face of great hardship inspired me to do this study. I hope my research will somehow extend beyond the pages of this document to promote social justice and acceptance.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Problem

While homoeroticism, or same-sex attraction, has existed throughout history with earliest records dating back at least to the ancient Greeks, the notion of an identity based on sexual expression is relatively new (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Williams, 1999). In fact, it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that scientists created the modern sexual identity categories of homosexual and heterosexual. The philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) had a profound influence on many contemporary gay and lesbian theorists through his text, *The History of Sexuality*. Regarding homosexuality in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault (1978/1990) said:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

Essentially, same-sex relations became a mark of who one was rather than what one did. Society began to define and identify homosexuals by their sexual behaviors.

Modern constructionist understandings of gay and lesbian identities are based on scientific studies of sexuality undertaken in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Constructionists believe that “identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself” (Jagose, 1996, p. 8). This position



resists essentialist notions of identity as fixed and innate (Jagose). Essentialists view homosexuality and heterosexuality as ahistorical categories while constructionists maintain that sexuality is defined by particular societies at particular points in history (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). In this dissertation, I take a constructionist approach, acknowledging that society and culture have a definite effect on our personal ideas and experiences of sexuality. For instance, the scientific examination of sexuality in the late 1800s dramatically shaped society's conceptions of homosexual behavior and identity.

Scientific exploration in the 1800s marked a transition “from a conception of sodomy as a category of forbidden *acts* defined by secular and religious law to that of the pervert as a *kind of person* defined by medical and psychiatric expertise” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 115). It was not until the 1950s that the term homosexual became part of the English and American lexicon due to the publication of the Kinsey reports (Halperin, 2000). Alfred Kinsey, a well respected scientist, meticulously categorized the gall wasp into taxonomies (D’Emilio, 1998). His research in the 1950s included the sexual histories and behaviors of over 10,000 Caucasian American men and women (Kinsey, Wardell, & Clyde, 1997). Although Kinsey’s methodology has been criticized, his continuum model of sexuality marked one of the first challenges to the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Parker, 2007). In other words, Kinsey’s work questioned the notion that individuals were exclusively heterosexual or homosexual by creating a classification system that placed individuals along a continuum based on their sexual behaviors.

In addition to Kinsey, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) influenced modern-day ideas about sexuality. Freud was one of the first scientists to tie sexuality with psychosocial

human development (Edwards & Brooks, 1999). He wrote little about homosexuality, only referring to it as a step on the path to what he defined as normal sexual activity (D'Emilio, 1998; Edwards & Brooks; Highwater, 1997). However, "Freud's pupils and successors in psychoanalysis placed homosexuality firmly in the sphere of pathology" (D'Emilio, p. 16), and much of the early scientific literature likened it to a disease, defect, and even insanity (D'Emilio). Although homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, new categories of dysfunction, such as gender identity disorder, were added (Van Wormer, Wells, & Boes, 2000). Some believe that these additional disorders continue to promote adherence to society's rigid categories of "normal" gender behavior (Rubin, 1993).

Same-sex eroticism has been damned, criminalized, medicalized, regulated, and reformed throughout history (Edwards, 1994). Even today homophobia and heterosexism still exist. Homophobia refers to an irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, which often leads to discrimination and violent acts (Adams et al., 2007). Heterosexism, on the other hand, is "the system of advantage or privilege afforded to heterosexuals in institutional practices, and policies and cultural norms that assume heterosexuality as the only natural sexual identity or expression" (Adams et al., p. 196). Institutional heterosexism is apparent when gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals are not offered the rights that heterosexuals enjoy, such as health insurance for partners, marriage, adoption, or hospital visitation.

Since the advent of sexual identity categories in the late 1800s, two beliefs have remained prevalent. First, heterosexuality is normal and natural, and, second,

homosexuality is the opposite of heterosexuality. This binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality creates exclusive categories of sexual identity and also places pressure on individuals to identify themselves based on these sexual identity categories (Altman, 1971). With heterosexuality being the privileged norm in our society, gay, lesbian, and queer individuals “have as their task the development of an identity that runs counter to the heterocentric culture in which they are socialized” (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 85). Furthermore, gay, lesbian, and queer individuals experience compulsory heterosexuality, a term coined by Adrienne Rich (1997) to delineate the penalties faced by those who identify as part of a non-normative sexual identity category.

The notion that being straight is correct, normal, and desired in our society certainly affects gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, particularly in their sexual identity development. With the pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm, gays and lesbians may struggle with their same-sex desires. Individuals may experience isolation, low self-esteem, depression, and anger (Morrow & Messinger, 2006; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996; Siker, 2007). These issues may even delay sexual identity development, which can be a lifelong process. There is some question as to what the process of sexual identity development looks like for gay and lesbian individuals. Although Freud (1905/1953) claimed that homosexuality was just a step in the development of normal heterosexual identity, other scientists provide a gay and lesbian affirmative approach. Of the models that have been proposed, Vivian Cass’ (1979) model has been the most widely used and adopted. Based on her work with lesbian and gay individuals, she proposed a six-stage model of sexual identity development. The six stages to sexual identity formation are identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity

pride, and identity synthesis. Cass' model is based on interpersonal congruence theory, "which submits that stability and change in a person's life are influenced by the congruence or incongruence that exists in his or her interpersonal environment" (Hunter, Shannon, Knox, & Martin, 1998, p. 58). As individuals move through these stages, they experience interactions between their sexual behaviors, their sexual identity, and their heterosexist and homophobic environment. Furthermore, "identities can change within individuals across situations and times" (Johnson, 2000, p. 258).

Related to the notion of sexual identity development is the concept of coming out (of the closet), a process that begins when individuals acknowledge their homosexuality (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). Rust (2003) explained that:

It is the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others. Coming out is made necessary by a heterosexist culture in which individuals are presumed heterosexual unless there is evidence to the contrary. (p. 227)

The process of coming out is comprised of many stages, including sexual identity formation, disclosure of sexual orientation to others, sexual expression and sexual behavior, and relationship to the gay community (Morris, 1997). This progression also includes initial awareness of feeling different, testing and exploring sexuality, accepting sexuality, and integrating sexuality with other aspects of identity (Savin-Williams, 1990). Although it is helpful to think of coming out as developmental, it is a lifelong process that is never complete (Rust; Sedgwick, 1993b).

A discussion of contemporary notions of sexual identity development and coming out would not be complete without mentioning queer theory. In the early 1990s, an Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) activist organization, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), became known as Queer Nation (Blasius, 2001). This marked the beginning of the reclaiming of the term “queer,” which previously had been used as a slur against gay and lesbian individuals (Epstein, 2005). Queer theory “teaches that identity is a cultural construction” (Talbert & Steinberg, 2000, p. 17) and places value in unconventional and non-normative sexual identities. It condemns conventional understandings of sexual binaries, and claims that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not the only ways to think about sexual identity (Blasius; Jagose, 1996). In fact, queer theorists call into question essentialist notions of identity, and instead view sexual identity as “fluid, paradoxical, political, multiple” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 8). Queer theory deconstructs sexual categories, creating a space for many non-normative sexual (and other) identities (Rust, 2003). In order to maximize the theory’s potential, scholars hesitate to define the term queer, other than to say that it refers to things outside of the norm (Halperin, 2003). Actually, the “vagueness of the term has political advantages” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 6). Queer theory provides a place for multiple identities in multiple categories, including gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth. Moreover, it suggests that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points of a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (Butler, 1993b, p. 208). In effect, queer politics question the notion of a true or essential gay or lesbian identity (Sedgwick, 1993b), and have “the potential to disrupt and challenge the nature of our cultural

assumptions about the development of identity, sexuality, and sexual identity” (Edwards & Brooks, 1999, p. 54).

### *Christian Views on Homosexuality*

Religion and sexuality “are inextricably intertwined for many people because virtually every religion regulates sexual behavior and dictates a specific set of values regarding human sexuality” (Worthington, 2004, p. 741). Throughout history, a schism has existed between non-normative sexuality and the Christian religion. “Despite a tradition of homoeroticism going back to the ancient Greeks, when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its state religion it also adopted the antisexual heritage of the Hebrews” (Williams, 1999, p. 125). By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was not uncommon for there to be mass executions of “sodomites” in Europe (Williams). This condemnation of same-sex relations was tied to Christianity. Indeed, “the term *sodomy* was taken from the biblical story of God’s destruction of the ancient city of Sodom. . . . [and] was defined loosely as any nonreproductive sexual act” (Williams, pp. 125-126).

The majority of people living in the United States today are Christians (Canda & Furman, 1999). In fact, religion has been a part of this country’s history since its inception; “many of the colonies that in 1776 became the United States of America were settled by men and women of deep religious convictions who in the seventeenth century crossed the Atlantic Ocean to practice their faith freely” (The Library of Congress, 1998, ¶ 1). Signed in 1791, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (United States Government, 2007, p. 21). Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802, explained that the First Amendment

builds a “wall of separation between church and State” (as cited in The Library of Congress, n.d., p. 1). Despite this separation, religion, and Christianity in particular, continues to play a part in United States’ politics, education, and society in general.

Throughout American history, the Christian church has condemned non-normative sexuality. Although Christians claim their religion is one of love and acceptance (Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001), many churches believe that “the rights of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals clearly fall beyond the scope of human rights, as their very sexuality is defined as not *human*” (Endsjo, 2005, p. 107). In fact, many churches in recent years have added anti-homosexual statements to their official policies and beliefs (Finlay & Walther, 2003). For example, the Catechism of the Catholic church explains that “among the sins gravely contrary to chastity are masturbation, fornication, pornography, and homosexual practices” (United States Catholic Church, 1995, item 2396).

Many Christians base their beliefs on the Bible and maintain that “God, in the Bible, stated that homosexuality is wrong” (Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999, p. 14). Biblical texts are important because Christians turn to them as the basis for their beliefs about homosexuality (Yip, 2003). There are six main Biblical passages regarding homosexuality. The first and most often quoted passage is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19: 1-8, 10-13, New International Version). It reads:

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your

way early in the morning.” “No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.” But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my room” . . . . The men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door. The two men said to Lot, “Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons, or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that He has sent us to destroy it.”

Many Christians believe that, based on this passage, God destroyed the city of Sodom due to the sin of homosexuality. However, it is important to note that other verses in the Bible referring back to this story explain that the sin of the city was actually inhospitality (Ezekiel 16: 49, Luke 17: 28-29). The second Biblical reference to homosexuality is Leviticus 18: 22, which instructs men: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” Additionally, Leviticus 20: 13 explains that “If a man lies with a man



as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” These two verses in Leviticus are part of the Levitical Code, or rules for living, which many view as outdated. For example, this Levitical Code also includes the mandates: “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19: 19). The fourth Bible verse regarding homosexuality is found in Romans 1: 26-27. It states that:

God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Next, the Bible comments on eternal judgment in 1 Corinthians 6: 9, 10:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.

Finally, 1 Timothy 1: 9-10 says “We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious . . . for homosexuals.” There are often debates as to whether these New Testament verses refer to the sin of homosexuality or the sin of idolatry or sexual perversion such as adultery, prostitution, or child molestation. Regardless, these verses are modern translations of Greek and Hebrew documents, and the original texts were written before the term “homosexual” existed.

It is important to note that “whether biblical passages on homoeroticism are treated as authoritatively or not rests ultimately on the outlook and interpretive framework used by a Christian community to make coherent sense of the Bible” (Locke, 2004, p. 125). Most individuals and churches interpret the Bible differently. Some view it as a historical document, some as a timely directive on how to live, some as the direct word of God, and some as an inspired story. Verses and passages have many interpretations, and those focusing on homosexuality are no exception. However, the majority of churches identifying with the Christian religion view homosexuality as a sin, regardless of the specific beliefs about the Bible.

In addition to Biblical reasons, Christians cite scientific information to support their beliefs about homosexuality. They challenge the idea that individuals are born homosexual, instead focusing on environmental causes (Jones & Kwee, 2005). Christians taking this stance believe that sexuality is a choice and can be manipulated. Reorientation therapy, a process by which sexual orientation is changed, is seen by many as an acceptable form of treatment for homosexuality (Carlton, 2004; Jones & Kwee; Lutz, 2004). A typical therapy session might include viewing heterosexual pornography in an effort to reorient gay and lesbian clients to become attracted to members of the opposite sex. This conversion therapy can be far from therapeutic, though, if clients feel guilt, shame, and frustration when it does not work (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004). Proponents of reorientation therapy tend to pathologize homosexuality and, in some cases, base their beliefs upon scientific research such as genetic scanning, human brain structure studies, and fraternal birth order research (Jones & Kwee). Some churches that welcome homosexuals, such as Exodus International, want to “cure their homosexuality,

which, they believe, results from thwarted psychological development caused by the sinful behavior of others toward the individual” (Wolkomir, 2001, p. 309). There is a difference, then, between churches that welcome gay and lesbian Christians and churches that accept homosexuality.

Many research studies have shown a positive correlation between fundamentalist or Christian beliefs and homophobia (Bassett, Kirnan, Hill, & Schultz, 2005; Cotten-Huston & Waite, 2000; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Fulton et al., 1999; Laythe et al., 2001; Marsiglio, 1993; Miller, 1996; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000). In addition, a research study of 200 American cities found a negative correlation between Baptist and Holiness-Pentecostal membership and strong gay communities (Dennis, 2002). In other words, there were fewer strong gay communities in areas where the Baptist and Pentecostal communities were strong. The research on fundamentalism and homophobia highlights the prevalence of homophobic beliefs in fundamentalist Christian churches. Encountering these homophobic attitudes will certainly affect gay, lesbian, and queer individuals who have been raised in Christian homes.

### *Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing*

The way in which religion and faith develop in an individual’s life varies. James Fowler (1981) in his book, *Stages of Faith*, posited that faith development is similar to other theories of human development, including those of Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget. Fowler delineated the stages of faith as intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and/or universalizing faith. All individuals, according to Fowler, go through some or all of these stages in their development of faith and religious identities.

Does Fowler's model of faith development hold true for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing? "When an adolescent or adult begins to feel an attraction toward someone of the same sex, a conflict may be created between alternative identities—their spiritual/religious identity and their sexual orientation and identity" (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 438). How are the mental health needs of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals impacted when important authorities in their lives tell them that they are "not *human*" (Endsjo, 2005, p. 107)? In fact, "when such anti-gay language and sentiment is encountered by gays and lesbians with a strong religious faith and a strong positive feeling towards their sexual orientation, they enter a situation where identity conflict can occur" (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, pp. 333-334). These individuals often deal with feelings such as guilt, shame, fear, depression, alienation, and anxiety (Wolkomir, 2001; Yip, 1998). Yip explained the toll these emotions take on gay Christians:

The pressure of leading the life of a gay Christian is colossal. The lack of religious affirmation and acceptance generates great tension and adjustment difficulty among gay Christians. Being in such a stigmatizing environment might even lead to internalized homophobia, through which gay Christians incorporate into their self-concept the negative views about their sexuality and lifestyle. (p. 42)

Internalized homophobia occurs when individuals suppress sexual desires, experience self-doubt or self-hatred, and regard themselves as evil (Gonsiorek, 1995).

For those who have a religious background, coming out is often more difficult (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). In one study, "self-disclosure

was highest when there was relatively little attachment to a church” (Savin-Williams, 1990, p. 116). Despite difficulties associated with coming out, many gay, lesbian, and queer identified Christians do decide to come out to friends, family, and church members. Subsequently, they are often banned from participating in church activities (Webster, 1998) and experience homophobic reactions from others. It should be noted that there are also positive aspects to coming out. Shallenberger (1996), for one, examined the ways that gays and lesbians interpret their spiritual journey. He explained that:

Coming to the awareness and acceptance of one’s homosexuality, or “coming out,” is a pivotal process in the lives of gay men and lesbian women. Many of the participants in this study saw this step as a deepening . . . acceptance of their identities, a movement toward fuller integrity. In this vein, it was inherently spiritual, for it led to a deeper acceptance of who one was, both alone and before God. (p. 204)

Whether or not individuals come out, when they choose to come out, and who they choose to come out to is certainly important. Furthermore, gay, lesbian, and queer identified Christians often have to come out as Christians to their homosexual communities and come out as gays, lesbians, or queers to their Christian communities (Webster).

Resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs can certainly be difficult. A “fundamental struggle for gay men and lesbians is to find ways to overcome the clash between homoprejudiced religious institutions that assert their authority and personal spiritual experiences that connect them with a Supreme Being who offers love and acceptance” (Barret & Logan, 2002, p. 153). Some individuals who

resolve conflicts between sexual identity and religious beliefs may experience transformations during the process of resolution. As described in Mezirow's (1997) transformational learning theory, the way in which we see ourselves and our world may change over time. The process of transformation is often precipitated by a disorienting dilemma, such as the conflict between religious and sexual identities (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Taylor 1998). Resolving the schism between religious beliefs and sexual identity can be mentally and emotionally difficult; it can last for years, or even for a lifetime (Yip, 1997b). For example, Yip explained that, "many gay Christians, having internalized the conventional church teachings that are negative toward homosexuality, experience a great deal of guilt and shame. This form of internalized homophobia is debilitating and painful" (p. 103) and can take an extended amount of time to overcome. Further, "fundamentalism can form an extreme challenge to forming sexual identity, if that identity does not adhere to the requisite religious beliefs" (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 437).

### *Gaps in the Literature*

The profession of social work has typically advocated for and supported those who are disadvantaged and disenfranchised, including those identifying as gay, lesbian, and queer. However, there is relatively little scholarly research with this population from a social work perspective. In reviewing the literature, it is evident that a social work viewpoint would be helpful in exploring the conflict between sexual identity and Christianity. This conflict is not only pervasive in the lives of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, it also has great impact on family, friends, and church relationships. Social work can provide a holistic view of the conflict between sexual identity and religious

upbringing, including the influences of family, church, and community. Finally, because social workers throughout history have advocated for social justice, research that dispels homophobic attitudes is particularly relevant.

Studies of gay and lesbian Christians have mostly occurred in the United Kingdom and northern United States cities such as New York and Chicago (Lukenbill, 1998; Shallenberger, 1996; Yip 1997a; Yip 1997b; Yip 1998; Yip 2003). With the commonness of Christianity in the United States, particularly in the Bible Belt or Southeastern United States, additional research is needed (Sullivan, 2003). The Bible Belt region, in addition to being a place where Christianity flourishes, is an area where there is notable prejudice against gay and lesbian individuals. The prevalence of both Christianity and homophobia in the Southeast makes it a good location to study the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Further, few studies have included queer identified individuals.

Most research projects to date have focused on the outcomes of the conflict between homosexuality and Christianity. There is a clear gap in the literature regarding the *process* by which individuals resolve this conflict. This research will be especially relevant to social workers and helping professionals serving clients who are experiencing conflicts between their sexual identity and religious beliefs.

#### Statement of the Problem

The role that religion plays in individuals' lives can be very important. It not only provides a set of values and morals to live by, it also can offer a social and emotional support system. However, religious beliefs can come into conflict with other aspects of people's identities. Many Christians and Christian churches contend that homosexuality

is a sin, punishable by an eternity in hell (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982). In fact, same-sex relationships have been legally condemned since the thirteenth century (Williams, 1999). Christians base their beliefs on the Bible and maintain that “God, in the Bible, stated that homosexuality is wrong” (Fulton et al., 1999, p. 14). This belief, though, may create conflict for gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing. Additionally, many gay, lesbian, and queer individuals have mental health issues as a result of the stress created by the schism between their religious beliefs and sexual identity (Almazan, 2007).

How do gay, lesbian, and queer Christians deal with this identity conflict? “There are strikingly different ways in which individuals cope with situations that present them with interpersonal, social, and ideological forces so much at odds with their own experience of their identities” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 334). The literature identifies various strategies of identity negotiation, including choosing between homosexuality and religion, integrating the two, and compartmentalization (Buchanan et al., 2001). However, information about this issue is sparse, and focuses only on the resolution of identity conflicts. This research fills a gap in the literature by exploring the *process* of resolving the conflict as opposed to the outcomes.

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. Within this broad purpose, I was specifically interested in the following research questions:



1. How do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?
2. What personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?
3. What is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and
4. How do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

### Significance of the Study

Homosexuals often experience guilt, shame, fear, depression, and alienation as a result of the heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism present in our society (Wolkomir, 2001; Yip, 1998). For gay, lesbian, and queer Christians, conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs augments issues already faced by the homosexual population. The mental health needs of the homosexual community are unique, but are rarely addressed adequately in mental health care systems (Rosenberg, Rosenberg, Huygen, & Klein, 2005). For example, gay, lesbian, and queer individuals are at higher risk for depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Almazan, 2007). However, in many communities there are limited resources specifically tailored to the particular struggles, such as homophobia and heterosexism, faced by gay, lesbian, and queer individuals (Rosenberg et al.). In order to attend to the needs of non-heterosexual individuals with a Christian upbringing, social workers and helping professionals must first understand their distinctive situations. This research adds to the current body of literature so that we can better understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual and religious identities.

It is important for social workers to be able to competently serve gay, lesbian, and queer individuals who are struggling with identity issues. In fact, the core values of the profession of social work include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999). Based on these values, NASW provides ethical principles, including cultural competence and social diversity, in its *Code of Ethics*. The *Code* explains that “social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation” (NASW, p. 9).

In general, our society displays homophobic and heterosexist beliefs, and the profession of social work is no different. Even with the mandate to understand the nature of social diversity with respect to sexual orientation, there is evidence that social workers and social work services are heterosexist and homophobic in nature. For example, Berkman and Zinberg (1997) found that 10 percent of their 187 heterosexual, master’s-level social worker respondents were homophobic and that a majority were heterosexist. In addition, Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) explained that “lesbian and gay issues are barely visible in the social work literature” (p. 345). In a content analysis of major social work journals between 1988 and 1997, these authors found that most articles with content related to gays and/or lesbians focused only on AIDS or coming out. Further, “of the 77 articles on homosexuality published during the decade, [only] five addressed practice issues for lesbian clients” (Van Voorhis & Wagner, p. 349). More recently, social work journals have published articles regarding culturally competent practice with gay and lesbian clients. Articles include information regarding a Gay Affirmative Practice Scale

(Crisp, 2006), a definition of culturally competent practice with sexual minorities (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004), and social workers' attitudes about and practices with this population (Berkman & Zinberg; Krieglstein, 2003; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002). Finally, two pieces provide a historical overview of gay and lesbian issues in America (Avery et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Of these articles, none focus on the specific issues of gay and lesbian identity development. This research helps bridge the gap between social work and sexual identity studies.

The lives and struggles of gays, lesbians, and queers with a Christian upbringing are important for a variety of reasons. Practicing social workers, in their work with these individuals, will benefit from continued research about conflicts between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Understanding the experiences of this population will help both practitioners and researchers in identifying appropriate interventions and support systems. Furthermore, participants in this study benefited from having a safe space to tell their stories and share their victories. As Sweasey (1997) pointed out:

Most books published on homosexuality and religion (the vast majority of which are intended for Christian readers) are arguments against religious homophobia, and attempts to minimize the damage which has been inflicted by certain religions upon so many lesbian, gay and bisexual people . . . we cannot live all of our lives in opposition, reacting to criticism. We should be spending the majority of our time and energy on our own lives—including our own spirituality. (p. ix)

This dissertation research attempts to do just that—to highlight the spirituality and religious beliefs of the participants. In the end, attending to the experiences and journeys of these individuals will promote understanding, acceptance, and social justice.

## Definitions

In addition to the terms defined below, all abbreviations are defined at the beginning of each chapter in which they are used as well as in Appendix A.

Christian upbringing: Christianity is a broad term encompassing a number of mainline denominations as well as individual nondenominational churches. Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and many others call themselves Christians, or followers of Jesus Christ. For this study, individuals self-identified as having a Christian upbringing. Although participants defined this term differently, the only requirement was an upbringing or background of belief in Jesus Christ. Further, participants identified as having experienced a conflict between their sexual identity and Christian beliefs.

Compulsory heterosexuality: Adrienne Rich (1997) coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” and said that “however we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, it [heterosexuality] flickers across and distorts our lives” (p. 61). According to Rich, women are especially disadvantaged by the political institution of heterosexuality because heterosexuality and masculinity are privileged and powerful (Jagose, 1996). Individuals, then, may feel forced to identify as heterosexual because of society’s punishment of homosexuality.

Heteronormativity: This term refers to the “principles of order and control that position heterosexuality at the cornerstone of the American sex/gender system and obligate the personal construction of sexuality and gender in terms of heterosexual norms” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 98).

Homoeroticism: Same-sex eroticism or homoeroticism refers to physical attraction to a member of the same sex. Individuals who experience homoeroticism may not necessarily exhibit same-sex behaviors or identify as homosexual.

Identity: Identity, from a postmodern perspective, is dynamic, complex, multifaceted, and ever-changing; it includes multiple social, cultural, and psychological dimensions (Hebert, 2001). Furthermore, different facets of identity, such as sexual orientation and religion, may come into conflict with one another.

Queer: I will not define queer in this dissertation, and argue that one cannot really define it at all. The notion of queer in and of itself resists definitions, categories, or labels. To provide some understanding of queer, though, I will describe queer theory. Queer theory condemns conventional understandings of sexual binaries, and claims that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not the only ways to think about sexual identity (Blasius, 2001; Jagose, 1996). Queer theorists call into question essentialist notions of identity, and instead view sexuality as “fluid, paradoxical, political, multiple” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 8). This position deconstructs sexual categories, creating a space for many non-normative sexual (and other) identities (Rust, 2003). In order to maximize its potential, scholars hesitate to define the term queer, other than to say that it refers to things outside of the norm (Halperin, 2003).

Sexual identity: Sexual identity is typically defined as how individuals situate themselves within known sexual categories. In other words, “sexual identity is the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166). For example, “Do you identify as gay? Lesbian? Queer?” (Parker, 2007, p. 239).

Identity applies to how one defines oneself as well as the “reference groups with which one chooses to orient” (Parker, p. 233).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. There were four research questions directing this study: (a) how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs? (b) what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict? (c) what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and (d) how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

In this chapter I will examine the literature related to this study. Kilbourn (2006) stated that “researchers must situate their work in relation to existing research (pp. 553-554). To accomplish Kilbourn’s directive, this chapter will be comprised of six parts. First, I will explore postmodern notions of identity in order to better understand identity conflict. Second, I will describe religious identity development using Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith. This will be followed by a third section outlining various Christian denominations’ stances on homosexuality. Fourth, I will illustrate sexual identity development using both Cass’ (1979) theory of gay and lesbian identity development and queer theory. In the fifth section, I will outline Mezirow’s (1991) transformational learning theory, which provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the transformations experienced by a number of participants. Finally, I will review the

existing literature related to gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

The literature that contributes to understanding the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality comes from various disciplines including Social Work, Women's Studies, Adult Education, Sociology, Religion, Conflict Studies, and Psychology. For this chapter I searched databases such as Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Religion and Philosophy Collection, and Dissertation Abstracts. I used combinations of the following descriptors for my review: homosexuality, sexuality, gay, lesbian, queer, queer theory, sexual identity development, religion, spirituality, stages of faith, Christian, postmodern identity, conflict resolution, and transformational learning.

As noted above, I did review the literature related to conflict resolution, and intended to include a relevant theory as part of this chapter. However, I unexpectedly found that materials on conflict resolution are focused on conflict between individuals, groups, and countries rather than on interpersonal or internal conflict. Hopefully, my dissertation research can contribute to the conflict resolution literature by providing a theory based on the resolution of an internal, identity conflict.

### Postmodern Identity

In a society focused so much on self, with terms like self-esteem, self-employment, self-help, self-realization, self-worth, and self-reflection, definitions of self or identity are surprisingly divergent. Most scholars and psychologists agree that identity is "shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social



and political contexts” (Adams et al., 2000, p. 9). It is in their definitions of identity that scholars differ, with some regarding it as unitary and others considering it nonunitary.

Historically, we have understood identity as unified, stable, and authentic. In “finding ourselves,” we search for some essential, core identity that is waiting to be discovered. Conversely, Clark and Dirkx (2000) posited that, in a postmodern world, the notion of the unified self is no longer applicable; it does not encapsulate the plurality of experiences and voices. Coady (2001) explained the difference between a postmodern and modern view of the world:

Postmodern philosophy challenges the modernist viewpoint that truth can be discovered via objective scientific observation and measurement. As opposed to the modernist quest to discover universal principles and large-scale theories that underlie all human behavior, the postmodernist holds that there is no absolute truth, only points of view. (p. 37)

Essentially, postmodernists view truths as multiple and relative instead of searching for one, all encompassing Truth that applies to everyone (Applegate, 2000). Indeed, postmodernists embrace “ambiguity, uncertainty and contingency as valuable ways of knowing” (Applegate, p. 142). Clark and Dirkx claimed that “the unitary model of the self no longer works to capture this complex and contested experience; we need new ways of conceptualizing the self that fit our own social and historical era” (p. 105).

From a postmodern perspective, we can regard the nonunitary self as multifaceted, dynamic, and ever-changing. The “notion of multiplicity is implicit in this nonunitary self, and it derives from the multiple positionings we experience” (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 109). For example, the way in which we experience our racial identity is

mediated by other identity factors, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth (Adams et al., 2000). Drawing on postmodern notions of identity, we can consider and incorporate these mediating factors, allowing for a process of identity formation that is on-going, open-ended, and flexible (Hebert, 2001). Postmodern identities, in other words, can be embraced and changed easily, which encourages people to live in the moment (Hebert).

Regarding identity categories, Adams et al. (2000) acknowledged “seven categories of ‘otherness’ commonly experienced in U.S. society. People are commonly defined as other on the bases of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability” (p. 11). Although all of these characteristics merge to form our complex identities, sometimes these identity factors come into conflict and set in motion an identity crisis. Such a crisis is exemplified by gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing as they grapple with their sexual identity and religious beliefs. This study attempted to identify the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Taking a postmodern view of identity, I examined this identity crisis and its process of resolution with an eye for fluidity, flexibility, and plurality.

Can we ever truly find ourselves? Do we reach some stage or phase where our identities are completely developed? These questions are pertinent when trying to identify the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. In studying this process of conflict resolution, I must also address one final

question—can an identity conflict between sexual orientation and religion ever be truly and completely resolved? Coming from a postmodern view, I take the position that identity is an ever-changing process of negotiating self, and that identity development is never complete.

### Religious Identity Development

Similar to other aspects of identity, religious identity and spirituality are developed over time (Fowler, 1981). Examining the concept of religious identity development first requires defining religion and spirituality. In this section I will discuss the distinctions between these two concepts. Then, I will outline the most widespread theory of faith and religious development, Fowler's stages of faith. After discussing the main characteristics of Fowler's theory, I will provide an overview of related literature as well as critiques of Fowler's theory.

### *Religion and Spirituality*

According to Hodge and McGrew (2006), people in general have very diverse definitions of religion and spirituality, with little consensus even among helping professionals. Nevertheless, "religion is most often discussed in terms of beliefs and values, doctrines and dogma" (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006, p. 588). Religion is associated with rituals and worship; it "implies community activity that binds or ties people together" (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006, p. 1259). Deutsch et al. posited that "religious identity forms from a mixture of beliefs and values, the influence of leaders and sense of belonging to a community, and one's membership or relationship to religious institutions and networks" (p. 593). People typically describe religious beliefs based on general categories such as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and so forth. However,

because Christianity is such a broad term, individuals may identify themselves based on their particular church or denomination. For example, someone might be a Christian, Protestant, Methodist, and member of the First United Methodist Church in their community.

Religion continues to be important in the lives of many Americans. In fact, religion, though only one aspect of identity, often supersedes other identity factors in making decisions because it answers some of the “most fundamental questions of life for many people” (Deutsch et al., 2006, p. 593). Individuals often turn to religious doctrine, such as the Bible, for direction; congregations and religious authorities also provide instruction on everything from getting along with others to appropriate sexual activity.

Spirituality is similar to religion in that it can describe individuals’ connectedness to God or a Higher Power (Hodge & McGrew, 2006). However, spirituality is a more encompassing concept that is not limited to religion. Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) described spirituality as individual and subjective. “The spiritual teachings of a faith tradition provide a narrative that helps believers make sense of the world and locate themselves in it” (Deutsch et al., 2006, p. 588). Spirituality can consist of beliefs about the importance of nature or the connectedness of life, and, for some people, does not include affiliation with any one religious doctrine. For example, an individual might describe his or her spirituality as simply seeking inner peace or a commitment to being a good person (Hodge & McGrew). “Spirituality, then, is concerned with persons’ search for meaning, purpose and values in life” (Frame, 2003, p. 2).

Although I have provided general definitions of religion and spirituality, different people understand these concepts in unique ways. In the study I asked participants to

describe their personal understandings of religion and spirituality rather than relying on any preconceived definitions.

### *Fowler's Stages of Faith*

Several scholars have written about the development of religious identity, moral identity, and faith. The most well-known theory of religious identity development was proposed by Fowler (1981). His stages of faith, based on interviews with over 350 individuals, provide a road map for religious identity development. Faith, in Fowler's theory, is "loyalty to a transcendent center of value and power" (p. 14). It is "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions" (p. 14). Fowler's theory is a stage theory, meaning that he identified progressive periods of faith that people experience. Fowler outlined the stages as intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith. Individuals, according to Fowler, go through some or all of these stages in their development of faith and religious identities.

Fowler (1981) advanced the notion that children begin their faith journey between the ages of two to seven. During this period, the intuitive-projective faith stage, individuals have not yet developed skills of logic and typically display magical and fluid thinking. Intuitive-projective children can be "powerfully and permanently influenced by the examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults" (p. 133).

When children develop concrete operational thinking, or logical reasoning, they move to mythical-literal faith. Individuals in this stage, through reasoning, sort out what is real and what is make-believe, even insisting "on demonstration or proof for claims of

fact” (Fowler, 1981, p. 135). People begin to accept the stories, observances, and beliefs of their communities; they use narratives to understand and give value to their experiences.

It is usually around the time of puberty or adolescence that children move into the synthetic-conventional faith stage, where they form “a personal myth—the myth of [their own] becoming in identity and faith” (Fowler, 1981, p. 173). Rather than using narratives to understand experiences, individuals begin to utilize formal operational thinking, reflecting on their own thoughts and mentally stepping outside of themselves (Fowler). With the numerous influences of family, friends, school, media, and religion, people in this stage must base their identities in the synthesis of these values. According to Fowler, even if individuals in this stage feel deeply about their values and beliefs, they have not truly examined their ideologies.

Most people move to the individuated-reflective faith stage in their twenties when they leave home, but the transition can also happen in the mid-thirties, forties, or not at all. In this stage, individuals develop both their self identity and their worldview through critical reflection. As this development occurs, they address tensions between group membership and individualism, objectivity and subjectivity, service and self-fulfillment, and absolutes and relativity (Fowler, 1981).

The conjunctive faith stage occurs in mid-life when people are aware that their own personal meanings are relative. Fowler (1981) explained that this stage is the most difficult to describe, and likened the emergence of conjunctive faith to “looking at a field of flowers simultaneously through a microscope and a wide-angle lens” (p. 184). Conjunctive faith goes beyond the clear boundaries of identity developed in

individuated-reflective faith. Individuals begin to recognize truth as multidimensional, and it is because of their personal profound faith that they are able to be open to understanding other faiths and traditions (Fowler). “Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience” (p. 198).

Only rarely do individuals experience universalizing faith. In this final stage, people have a “radical commitment to justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in *their* images, but in accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent” (Fowler, 1981, p. 201). According to Fowler:

Persons who come to embody universalizing faith are drawn into those patterns of commitment and leadership by the providence of God and the exigencies of history. It is as though they are selected by the great Blacksmith of history, heated in the fires of turmoil and trouble and then hammered into usable shape on the hard anvil of conflict and struggle. (p. 202)

Fowler cited Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel, and Thomas Merton as examples of individuals whose lives are characterized by universalizing faith.

#### *Literature Related to Fowler's Theory*

There is an abundance of research based upon Fowler's theory, though none has examined the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity. Streib (2005) explained that most of the literature empirically tested a variety of faith development instruments based on Fowler's stages of faith. Faith development instruments include the

Faith Development Interview, the Faith Styles Scale, and the Faith Development Scale (Parker, 2006). Parker described and evaluated all of these measures, and found that they “neglect some aspects of faith development theory” (p. 345). The Faith Development Interview, which was developed by Fowler himself, was found to be the most reliable (Parker). However, because Fowler’s Interview takes a long time to administer, the other measures may be more attractive to researchers. Regardless of the measure, it can be difficult to capture the complexity of faith in one assessment.

Some authors use methods other than the aforementioned measurements in order to assess participants’ faith stages. This was the case in Green and Hoffman’s (1989) study in which Christian college students rated mock college applicants with varied religious orientations. The authors were interested in the relationship between raters’ faith stages and their perceptions of applicants who were either religiously similar or dissimilar. In order to place the student raters in a faith stage, the researchers created statements to represent each stage. For example, stage two, mythical-literal faith, was represented by the statement: “God tells us what He wants from us (for instance, through the Bible and people in important positions) and we are to follow His will obediently” (Green & Hoffman, p. 250). The student raters identified the statement that most accurately represented their own faith. This study found that individuals in earlier faith stages rated religiously similar others more positively than dissimilar others. Further, respondents in later faith stages “did not rate similar and dissimilar others significantly differently” (Green & Hoffman, p. 246). These findings support Fowler’s work and provide an alternative way to assess individuals’ faith stages.



In another study, Gathman and Nesson (1997) studied the faith development of college students in an honors science and religion seminar. Their study utilized Fowler's stages of faith as a framework to characterize students' faith. By comparing students' writings at the beginning and end of the course, the authors found that students experienced shifts in their understandings of faith. Unlike other researchers, Gathman and Nesson did not assess participants' faith stages through assessments, questions, or interviews; instead, they inferred faith stages based on students' writings.

In another study, Philibert (1982) investigated the concept of moral maturity of churches in six denominations: Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, and Church of God. He found that only two of these denominations, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, "prefer critical stage four to conventional stage three for the outcome of religious education; none want stage five" (Philibert, p. 286). Therefore, according to this study, Fowler's stages of faith may not be representative of the goals of various denominations or churches. In fact, some churches may call upon their members to follow their faith without question; such obedience actually reflects Fowler's earlier stages rather than advanced faith. In this study, it was important to understand both the participants' personal faith and their churches' attitudes.

In summary, there is a vast array of research utilizing Fowler's stages of faith in some way, and the studies I outlined above represent only a small portion of the literature. It is clear that Fowler "has a national and international reputation as the unequivocal expert on faith development" (Miller-McLemore, 2006, p. 639). Although some research draws upon Fowler's work as a theoretical framework (Gathman & Nesson, 1997), other studies specifically examine or test the theory itself (Green &

Hoffman, 1989). In this study of gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing, Fowler's theory offered a theoretical framework in which to examine participants' faith and religious identity development.

### *Critiques of Fowler's Theory*

Although Fowler's work is generally recognized as the preeminent faith development theory, it is not without critics. In fact, there have been many critiques of stage theories in general. Rust (2003) explained that "although models are developed to *describe* psychological and social phenomena, when they are used in efforts to predict or facilitate the processes they describe, they become *prescriptive*" (p. 239). In particular, theorists and researchers question the linear aspect of stage theories. Especially problematic is the tendency to view stages as essential in the "normal" developmental process. Further, with the last phase being the goal, those who do not reach this stage are not viewed as having fully developed their identities.

In addition to general critiques about stage theories, Fowler's theory has its own limitations. Leak, Loucks, and Bowlin (1999) explained that the stages of faith emphasize cognitive processes rather than psycho-religious functioning. In other words, Fowler's theory espoused "a faith of the head, but not of the heart or hands" (Leak et al., p. 122). Faith, in Fowler's theory, does not incorporate the certainty of existence, power of salvation, or emotion of spiritual traditions (Jardine & Viljoen, 1992; Loder, 1982; Watt, 2003). Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which Fowler cites as a foundation for his stages of faith, has also been critiqued for its focus on cognition (Cartwright, 2001).

Miller-McLemore (2006) offered another critique of Fowler's work. She explained that although Fowler included stages of faith related to children, dominant voices "over the past two decades tended to focus on adulthood more than on childhood" (p. 637). According to Miller-McLemore, Fowler's theory could contribute more to religious education if it included an equal focus on children.

A final critique of Fowler's work is that it does not account for the influence of ethnic culture on faith development (Watt, 2003). Faith development may differ for underrepresented individuals. In particular, ethnic culture and faith development intersect for those asking the question: "Who am I within a society that devalues my race and gender?" (Watt, p. 34). In a similar vein, I suggest that Fowler's theory provides only one piece of the puzzle when exploring the experiences of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. Other information, such as Christian doctrine related to homosexuality, can also advance our understanding of faith development and sexual identity development.

#### Christian Doctrine Related to Homosexuality

Faith development often occurs within the confines of particular religious organizations or places of worship. Within these institutions, members may look to religious doctrine to inform their personal beliefs. Of particular importance to this study are Christian beliefs about homosexuality. Christians generally refer to the Bible as the basis for their views on sexuality. Because Biblical texts about homosexuality can be interpreted in various ways, many Christian denominations and churches have introduced or reinforced formal doctrines or belief statements to settle this issue (Adams et al., 2000). These statements often refer to homosexuality as sin, gay and lesbian civil rights,

ordination of gay and lesbian individuals, commitment ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples, and church membership for gays and lesbians (Donnelly, 2001). Although official church doctrine does not necessarily reflect the thoughts and actions of individual churches or church members, it is nonetheless helpful in examining Christian stances on homosexuality. Additionally, pro-gay and lesbian groups have actually formed out of many of the denominations that denounce homosexuality. Examples include the Catholic group Dignity USA and the United Methodist Reconciling Movement. In this section, I will summarize various denominational beliefs on homosexuality, presenting them from the most condemning to the most supportive. The denominations outlined below are the Jehovah's Witness organization, the Church of Christ, the National Association of Free Will Baptists (FWB), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA), the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UU) and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC). These were chosen because they represent the preponderance of Christians in the United States (University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center, 2004), because of their uniquely positive view of homosexuality among Christian denominations, or because they were specifically mentioned by participants.

#### *The Jehovah's Witness Organization*

The Jehovah's Witness organization began in the late 1800's in Pennsylvania as a small Bible study group, and, in the early 1900's, became international (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania [WTB], 2006). From the "one small Bible study

in Pennsylvania back in 1870, the Witness organization by the year 2000 grew to some 90,000 congregations worldwide” (WTB, ¶ 14). According to the WTB (2008a), “the Bible is clear: God does not approve of or condone homosexual practices” (¶ 9); on the contrary, the Bible condemns homosexuality (WTB, 2008b). For people who experience same-sex desire, they should not act on those desires; in fact, by turning to God, these people can win the battle over their sinful lusts (WTB, 2008b). Regarding same-sex marriage, the Jehovah’s Witness organization says that “God intended marriage to be a permanent and an intimate bond between a man and a woman” (WTB, 2008a, ¶ 6). The organization has one of the harshest stances on homosexuality out of all of the denominations, calling for disfellowship and total separation from any individual who identifies as gay or lesbian.

### *The Church of Christ*

The Church of Christ (2007) dates back to the Restoration Movement of the late 1700s, and today it includes more than 15,000 congregations. The Church (2007) has no creed other than the Bible. “There is no other manual or discipline to which the members of the Church of Christ give their allegiance. The Bible is considered as the only infallible guide to heaven” (¶ 22). Therefore, church doctrine on homosexuality is taken from Bible verses such as Leviticus 18: 22, which says “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. It is an abomination” (New International Version). The official webpage of the Church of Christ (2008) does include the following statement in addition to the Bible verses:

Homosexuality is a lifestyle. It is a choice made by those who desire the unnatural. Can a homosexual person repent and be forgiven by God? The answer

is yes . . . . God remains consistent in His condemnation of homosexuality as He does for all other sins. Homosexuality is indeed an unacceptable lifestyle before our Lord God Almighty. By the written Word of the Most High God we cannot condone or embrace homosexuality within the church. (§ 5, 7)

In addition to the group described here, there are Churches of Christ that are associated with other groups, such as the Worldwide Church of Christ, International Church of Christ, or just independent, nondenominational Church of Christ.

*The National Association of Free Will Baptists*

The FWB (2007) sprang up in the 1700s when Paul Palmer started a church in North Carolina and Benjamin Randall organized a congregation in New Hampshire. “Both lines of Free Will Baptists taught the doctrines of free grace, free salvation and free will, although from the start there was no organizational connection between them” (§ 3). In the early 1900s, these two groups merged to become FWB, which today includes “2,400 churches in 42 states and 14 foreign countries” (§ 7). Neither the official websites of the FWB, their FWB Treatise, nor the FWB Church Covenant include any information on homosexuality. However, in a search of individual FWB churches, I found many negative references to homosexuality. For example, one Statement of Faith proclaimed, “We believe that homosexuality is a sin and shall not be taught or practiced by the churches of this Association (Romans 1: 21-32)” (The Original Stone Association of Free Will Christian Baptists, n.d., § 14). Similarly, several FWB churches (Enid Free Will Baptist Church, 2008; First Free Will Baptist Church, 2007) declared the exact same beliefs about homosexuality:

We believe that any form of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, bestiality, incest, fornication, adultery and pornography are sinful perversions of God's gift of sex . . . . We believe that the only legitimate marriage is the joining of one man and one woman Genesis 2: 24; Romans 7: 2; 1 Corinthians 7-10; Ephesians 5: 22-23). (§ 13)

Because FWB separated from the SBC due to the SBC's loose stance on salvation and based on the tenets of FWB faith, we can assume that FWB has a harsher stance than the SBC on homosexuality (The Executive Office of FWB, 2001).

*The Southern Baptist Convention*

The SBC (1999-2007a) was organized in Augusta, Georgia in 1845 and refers to "both the denomination and its annual meeting" (§ 2). Today the SBC includes over 16 million members in more than 42,000 churches in the United States, and it is the largest Protestant denomination in the nation (Donnelly, 2001). The SBC's (1999-2007b) position statement on sexuality includes a description of the organization's thoughts about homosexuality:

We affirm God's plan for marriage and sexual intimacy—one man, and one woman, for life. Homosexuality is not a "valid alternative lifestyle." The Bible condemns it as sin. It is not, however, unforgivable sin. The same redemption available to all sinners is available to homosexuals. They, too, may become new creations in Christ. (§ 1)

In recent years, the SBC "has become aggressively more negative toward homosexuality. They now actively discriminate against homosexuals, saying no to civil rights and membership, if one is sexually active" (Donnelly, p. 90). As compared to other

mainstream Christian denominations, the conservative SBC demonstrates more opposition to homosexuality.

### *The United Methodist Church*

The *Book of Discipline* includes the official beliefs agreed upon by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. According to the *Book of Discipline*, the United Methodist Church (2004b) “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (§ 5). In this denomination, homosexuals cannot serve as laypersons or ministers, and no church funds can support or promote the acceptance of homosexuality (United Methodist Church, 2004c). However, United Methodists (2004b) do not reject or condemn gay and lesbian friends or church members. In fact, church members commit “to be in ministry for and with all persons” (§ 5). This denomination believes that homosexuals should be afforded basic human rights and civil liberties, including claims of material resources, guardian relationships, pensions, and so forth (United Methodist Church, 2004a). Because the United Methodist Church promotes civil rights for homosexuals, this denomination is considered moderate when compared to the SBC. However, the United Methodist Church is more conservative than the other denominations below that allow membership and ordainment for celibate homosexuals.

### *The Roman Catholic Church*

Roman Catholics make up more than half of all Christians worldwide. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which outlines in detail the beliefs of the United States Catholic Church (USCC, 1995), stated:



Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (item 2357)

Although the USCC acknowledged homosexual tendencies, the organization explained that individuals must manage this condition through chastity, self-mastery, prayer, and sacramental grace. By no means should individuals act upon these tendencies.

Compared to the conservative views of the SBC, the USCC is more moderate. Although USCC doctrine does not support homosexual behaviors, it allows for openly gay membership and ordainment so long as individuals maintain celibacy (Donnelly, 2001).

### *The Episcopal Church*

The Episcopal Church is the United States branch of the larger Anglican Church. The worldwide Anglican community includes 77 million people within “independent, autonomous churches” (Conan, 2007, p. 1). Neither the Anglican Church nor the Episcopal Church have doctrinal statements of faith like other denominations. However, on February 27, 2007, Neal Conan reported on National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation* that “the Episcopal Church is on the brink of schism with the worldwide Anglican Communion” (p. 1) because of its differing views about homosexuality. In fact, the

Episcopal Church was “ordaining gay bishops and authorizing blessings for same-sex couples” (Conan, p. 1). A split between the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church has not occurred, but the conflict continues. Like many other denominations, the Episcopalians’ practices differ from church to church and are heavily influenced by laypeople (Conan). Because of these differences of practices and because the Church does not have an official doctrine, it is difficult to compare Episcopal beliefs about homosexuality to other denominations. However, the groups’ views on homosexuality are typically considered moderate to liberal (Donnelly, 2001).

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

ELCA (2006) formed in 1982 when the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran church in America joined together. The ELCA (n.d.b.) can “trace its roots directly to the Protestant Reformation that took place in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (§ 1) under the influence of Martin Luther. Currently, there are over 4.8 million baptized members and over 10,000 congregations of the ELCA (2006). The ELCA (n.d.a.) “does not have a social statement of its own on human sexuality, but relies on the social statements of its predecessor church bodies” (§ 1). The topic of homosexuality is being deliberated in the ELCA, and there is not an official stance or statement at this point. However, the ELCA (n.d.a.) does officially state that they welcome gay and lesbian individuals to their congregations. Additionally, the ELCA rejects “discrimination, assault, and harassment of gay and lesbian persons” (§ 2). Although the ELCA does not officially sanction same-sex unions, they leave the decision up to individual pastors to provide pastoral care in this matter. The ELCA continues to study and ponder issues of human sexuality and sexual identity.

Their exploration, *Journey Together Faithfully: A Call to Study and Dialogue*, is dedicated to these subject matters (ELCA, n.d.a.).

*The Presbyterian Church of the United States of America*

PCUSA has “approximately 2.3 million members, more than 10,000 congregations and 14,000 ordained and active ministers” (PCUSA, n.d.c, ¶ 1). Regarding homosexuality, PCUSA (n.d.a) noted that it seems to be in contradiction with the scriptures and “is not God’s wish for humanity” (¶ 8). PCUSA (n.d.a; n.d.b) has affirmed civil rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation, but these civil rights do not include marriage. PCUSA (n.d.b) admonished churches:

No church should insist that gay and lesbian people need therapy to change to a heterosexual orientation, nor should it inhibit or discourage those individuals who are unhappy with or confused about their sexual orientation from seeking therapy they believe would be helpful. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms that medical treatment, psychological therapy, and pastoral counseling should be in conformity with recognized professional standards. (¶ 13)

Similar to the Episcopal Church, PCUSA has allowed for some decisions to be made by local churches, including whether or not to ordain a gay minister (Conan, 2007).

*The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*

The Universalist Church of American began in 1793 while the American Unitarian Association started in 1825. In 1961 these two groups joined together to form UU (UU, 2008b). UU (2008a) is a “liberal religion that encompasses many faith traditions. Unitarian Universalists include people who identify as Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and others” (¶ 1). UU does

not have an official creed or doctrine, and, instead, encourages its members to “search for truth on many paths” (UU, 2008a, ¶ 1). However, UU does promote a general philosophy of acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy, as evidenced in their online statement about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (UU, 1008c). “In 1996 the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association] made history by being the first mainline denomination in the U.S. to adopt a position supporting legally recognized marriage between members of the same sex” (UU, 2008c, ¶ 5). Not only do they support same-sex marriage, but UU allow for non-heterosexual persons to be ordained as ministers in their organization.

*The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches*

MCC is a Christian denomination that “has traditionally served a largely homosexual membership” (Lukenbill, 1999, p. 440). MCC (2005a) began with a gathering of 12 individuals led by Reverend Troy Perry in Huntington Park, California on October 6, 1968. Today MCC has grown to over 43,000 members with 300 congregations in 22 countries. Along with core values of love, community, spiritual transformation, and social action, MCC’s (2005b) statement of vision stated that church members are on a “bold mission to transform hearts, lives, and history. We are a movement that faithfully proclaims God’s inclusive love for all people and proudly bears witness to the holy integration of spirituality and sexuality” (¶ 1). MCC is known for not only its openness towards gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, but also its celebration of these sexual identities.

## Sexual Identity Development

Similar to religious identity development, scholars have proposed theories of gay and lesbian identity development. However, we must first understand what sexual identity is before we can discuss its development. In particular, what distinguishes sexual identity from desire and behavior? Altman (1971) explained that “the conventional definition of homosexuality has always been a behavioral one: a homosexual is anyone who engages in sexual acts with another of his or her sex” (p. 21). However, Vaid (1995) proposed that of the individuals who engage in same-sex behaviors, few actually self-identify as homosexual or bisexual. In general, contemporary scholars define sexual desire, behavior, and identity in similar ways. I will begin this section by defining these three concepts. Then, I will discuss and critique two widely used theories of sexual development, Cass’ theory of gay and lesbian identity development and queer theory.

### *Sexual Desire, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Identity*

Sexual *desire* is based on a biological drive that leads to sexual attraction to certain people (Bailey, 1995; Nussbaum, 1999). Desire is “*about* an object, and *for* an object” (Nussbaum, p. 266). Even though desire may be partly biological in nature, it is also culturally shaped. In fact, “society shapes a great deal, if not all, of what is found erotically desirable” (Nussbaum, p. 266). Parker (2007) extended the definition of sexual desire by differentiating between sexual attraction and romantic attraction, explaining that romantic attraction focuses on the desire for a relationship. In other words, desire includes both the appeal of having sex with others and the attraction to others (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1997). When considering sexual desire, it is important to understand that individuals might not actually act on these desires. Hence, an individual

might be sexually attracted to members of the same sex but only exhibit heterosexual behaviors.

Sexual *behavior* is sexual contact of some kind (Johnson & Kivel, 2006; Parker, 2007). “Traditionally, homosexual behavior has been used to categorize specific actions conducted with a partner of the same gender” (Johnson & Kivel, p. 98). However, no prescriptions are provided regarding what type of contact or how often this contact occurs. In other words, does a single experience of kissing a member of another sex “count” as heterosexual behavior? Furthermore, even if individuals have regular same-sex contact, they may not necessarily identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This has led Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) researchers, scientists, and educators, for example, to focus on sexual practices and behaviors instead of sexual identities (Jagose, 1996).

Sexual *identity* is typically defined as how individuals situate themselves within known sexual categories. Essentially, “sexual identity is the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166). Identity applies to how one defines oneself as well as to the “reference groups with which one chooses to orient” (Parker, 2007, p. 233). Reference groups such as gay, lesbian, and queer are relatively new when considering the history of sexuality. Further, these reference groups may be sexual as well as political in nature (Brown, 1995). For example, Bunch (2001) described lesbianism as a political (not sexual) choice when she said that the “woman-identified-woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support” (p. 126).

Given the distinctions between desire, behavior, and identity, sexuality can be described as “messy.” For example, individuals may experience same-sex desire while only exhibiting heterosexual behaviors. In order to address these issues, Holden and Holden (1995) created a sexual identity profile which includes five dimensions: (a) sexual orientation/erotic attraction, (b) attitude/beliefs about what is appropriate or acceptable, (c) private interpersonal erotic behavior, (d) public image/social perception, and (e) nonerotic behaviors. Individuals rate themselves on a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual for each of these dimensions. Obviously, sexual identity is not simple or clean cut, and does not stand alone. In the postmodern world, sexual identity intersects with other aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, education, and so forth (Johnson, 2000; Kivel, 1997; Seidman, 1993).

#### *Cass’ Theory of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development*

Of the theories of homosexual identity development, Cass’ (1979) theory of gay and lesbian identity development is the most widely used. Cass acknowledged that identity can change over time and utilized interpersonal congruence theory as a foundation for her work. Interpersonal congruence theory purports that incongruences in individuals’ interpersonal environments influence them to change some aspect of their lives because of their desires for congruence (Hunter et al., 1998). This theory informs Cass’ stages in two important ways. First, gay and lesbian individuals experience interactions between their sexual desires, behaviors, and identities, and their heterosexist and homophobic environments. Second, individuals act or react when there is some incongruence in these interactions. For example, a woman may hear messages from her church, parents, and friends that she should be in relationships with men and that lesbians

are sinners. If this woman feels sexually attracted to other women, she will experience incongruence between her desires and her environment. This example illustrates how Cass' theory uses incongruence as the basis for change.

Based on her work with lesbian and gay individuals, Cass (1979) proposed six stages of sexual identity formation. Like Fowler's work, Cass' theory is a stage theory. The six stages of sexual identity development, outlined below, include identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

In identity confusion, individuals begin to feel dissonance between their assumed heterosexuality and their same-sex desires and/or behaviors (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Questions arise regarding sexuality, and individuals wonder if they are really heterosexual after all. They will either "consider the possibility of a homosexual identity . . . or reject this possibility entirely, foreclosing further development" (Cass, 1984, p. 150).

Moving to identity comparison, individuals begin to accept that they might be gay or lesbian and realize that they are somehow different from heterosexuals. Understanding that heterosexuality is typically desired and acceptable, an individual in this stage will continue to "present a heterosexual identity to others" (Hunter et al., 1998, p. 60). Still, people in this stage experience isolation and "alienation as the differences between self and nonhomosexual others becomes clearer" (Cass, 1984, p. 151).

Next, in identity tolerance, individuals deal with isolation by seeking out other gays and lesbians (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Reaching out to other gay and lesbian individuals to meet social, emotional, and sexual needs is a marker of "increasing



commitment to a homosexual self-image” (Cass, 1984, p. 151). For individuals who perceive homosexuality as undesirable, contact with others may be viewed as a necessary way to cope with isolation. In this stage, a gay or lesbian identity is tolerated rather than accepted.

When individuals are sure of their sexual orientation but only selectively disclose this information, they are in the identity acceptance stage. Often, they may “pass” for heterosexual when faced with intolerance from others (Hunter et al., 1998). They adopt “a philosophy of fitting into society, while also retaining a homosexual lifestyle” (Cass, 1984, p. 151).

Having a positive sense of sexual identity, individuals move to the identity pride stage. In this stage, they resolve society’s intolerance of homosexuality by becoming angry at the heterosexist and homophobic environment around them (Hunter et al., 1998). This anger may lead to “disclosure and purposeful confrontation with non-homosexuals in order to promote the validity and equality of homosexuals” (Cass, 1984, p. 151).

In the final stage, identity synthesis, individuals no longer take an “us” against “them” attitude, and they recognize that their sexuality is only one component of their larger identity (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). The “ultimate goal is to attain psychological integration or consistency between perceptions of oneself and one’s behavior and between one’s private and public identities” (Hunter et al., 1998, p. 61).

#### *Literature Related to Cass’ Theory*

Similar to Fowler’s theory of faith development, Cass’ theory is recognized as the traditional and standard theory of gay and lesbian sexual identity development. Researchers often draw upon Cass’ theory in studying sexual development; many studies

have included measurements based on Cass' sexual identity stages. Among these measurements is one developed by Cass herself in 1984, the Stage Allocation Measure. This assessment corresponds with the sexual identity stages, and it provides individuals with a short description of each stage so that they might identify their own level of development.

Whitman, Cormier, and Boyd's (2000) study is one example of research using Cass' measurement. They explored how women at different stages of sexual identity development managed their lesbian identities. They found that even though the participants were at various stages of development, they managed their lesbian identities similarly. For example, "across all stages, the quality and importance of relationships with others was key for participants in their coming out decision-making process" (Whitman et al., p. 13). This study highlights the need to view Cass' theory in context; stages of sexual identity development do not provide a holistic view of sexuality.

Another measure, the Gay Identity Questionnaire, was developed by Brady and Busse (1994) and is based on Cass' theory of sexual identity development. Brady and Busse's instrument is different from Cass' Stage Allocation Measure in two main ways. First, the Questionnaire measures only gay identity in males as opposed to gay and lesbian sexual identity. Second, it suggests more of a "two-stage process rather than the six-stage process proposed by Cass" (Brady & Busse, p. 2). Even with these differences, Peterson and Gerrity (2006) found that the Questionnaire was positively and strongly correlated with Cass' own measure in their study of internalized homophobia, lesbian identity development, and self-esteem in undergraduate women.

In summary, Cass' work is widely cited and used as a theoretical foundation for sexuality research. Much of the literature utilizes measures of sexual identity development that are based on Cass' theory. In this study of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, Cass' theory offered one theoretical framework in which to examine participants' sexual identity development.

### *Critiques of Cass' Theory*

Cass' theory, like Fowler's, is a stage theory, making it susceptible to general criticisms of this type of theory. One such critique of Cass' theory is that it does not include the possibility of multiple sexual identities across the lifespan (Rust, 2003). For example, the notion of coming out as a lifelong process does not fit into the sexual identity development stages. This is certainly an important point because "even at an individual level, 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" (Sedgwick, 1993a, p. 46). Because heterosexuality is assumed, individuals must decide whether or not to reveal their sexual orientation. With homophobia and heterosexism being prevalent in society, some may decide not to disclose.

A second critique of Cass' theory is that it only speaks to one aspect of identity, leaving out the influence of other identity categories. Because "one's sexual identity is intertwined with one's gender, racial/ethnic, religious, and other identities, a change in one implies changes in others" (Rust, 2003, p. 232). For example, gender may affect sexual identity development. Gonsiorek (1995) found that sexual identity formation "appears to be more abrupt for men, and more likely to be associated with psychiatric

symptoms; for women the process appears to be characterized by greater fluidity and ambiguity” (p. 31). Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000) examined Cass’ theory and found that it generally held true in their research with 12 lesbian women. However, they found that women did not go through all of the stages in a linear fashion before reaching synthesis.

Finally, Cass’ theory seems to promote essentialist notions of sexuality (Hunter et al., 1998). Essentialist views “of cross-cultural differences reveal another bias inherent in linear models of coming out, that is, that they do not adequately account for the role of social constructs in shaping sexuality” (Rust, 2003, p. 243). As opposed to essentialists, constructionists focus “on the power of social interaction and culturally shared assumptions for shaping knowledge and meaning” (Coady, 2001, p. 38). Viewing sexual identity development from a constructionist approach would allow for individuals to have multiple sexual and religious identities across the lifespan. In fact, “the social constructionist approach views fluctuations in self-identity as a socially and psychologically mature response to one’s changing social contexts” (Hunter et al., p. 64). Coming from a more constructionist perspective, queer theories of identity may be preferred to stage theories of identity development.

### *Queer Theory*

In the early 1990s, an AIDS activist organization, ACT-UP, became known as Queer Nation (Blasius, 2001). Previously used as a slur against gay and lesbian individuals, the term “queer” was reclaimed. Individuals, instead of using the commonly known sexual identity categories of gay and lesbian, started identifying as queer. Being queer allowed people to “leave behind seemingly rigid identity categories, which were

merely templates that excluded the fluidity and multiplicity of self, body, desires, behaviors, and social relations” (Seidman, 1996, p. 12). In fact, the identification of queer includes not only those who are gay or lesbian, but also “those whose behaviors or sympathies challenge the dominant structures of sex, gender, and sexual identity” (Seidman, p. 322). In recent years, queer has been defined “sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1).

Queer theory “has largely been the creation of academics, mostly feminists and mostly humanities professors” (Seidman, 1996, p. 13). It places value in unconventional or non-normative sexualities and characterizes identity as a cultural construction (Talbot & Steinberg, 2000). Queer theory has been influenced by Foucault, Sedgwick, Butler, Derrida, and others. Foucault and Derrida’s writings have focused on the historical, cultural, and discursive nature of categories, which include sexual identity (Talbot & Steinberg, 2000). Queer theorists identify Sedgwick’s (1993a) *Epistemology of the Closet* and Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* as significant queer works. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1990, 1993a, 2004) discussed how gender is culturally shaped, performative in nature, and privileges heterosexuality. Further, deconstructing normative categories of gender “legitimizes lesbian and gay subject-positions” (Jagose, 1996, p. 83). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick questioned the heterosexual/homosexual divide and troubled the notion of the closet. She explained that modern culture has set up binaries of masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, same/different, majority/minority, and so forth.

Queer theory shapes this study in several ways. First and foremost, it lays a pathway for distinguishing between sexual desire, behavior, and identity, and allows for paradoxes that are present when examining different aspects of identity. For example, several of the participants in this study challenge the idea that one cannot be both gay, lesbian, or queer and Christian. As the concept of queer relates to non-normative identities, participants are, in essence, queering faith as well as sexuality. They are defying the culturally constructed binary of non-heterosexuality and Christianity. In this study, queer theory provided a lens by which to examine faith and sexual identity as fluid and intertwined concepts.

#### *Literature Related to Queer Theory*

Although queer theory has been propelled by academia, the ambiguous nature of the term “queer” makes it a difficult concept to study (Jagose, 1996). Queer studies, though, have become a staple of many college campuses across the nation. Several contemporary scholars use queer theory as a lens for understanding sexuality, music, literature, and society. In fact, queer theory poses “no threat to the monopoly of the established disciplines; on the contrary, queer theory could be incorporated into each of them, and it could then be applied to topics in already established fields” (Halperin, 2003, p. 342). For example, William Pinar (2003), a professor at Louisiana State University, explained that “it is queer theory that has enabled me to understand that the democratization of American society cannot proceed without a radical restructuring of hegemonic white male subjectivity” (p. 357).

Gamson (2000) explained that there are relatively few empirical works based solely on queer theory. Rather, this theory is applied to the theoretical work of

reconceptualizing and deconstructing concepts such as sexual identity. In this study of the experiences of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, queer theory provided an additional lens with which to view sexual identity development. With more and more individuals identifying as queer, I drew upon queer theory in understanding participants' identities in our postmodern society.

### *Critiques of Queer Theory*

Unlike stage theories, queer theory does not risk providing a prescription of identity development; nor does it provide a description. Social work practitioners may be more attracted to stage theories because they provide a linear description for sexual identity development. Although the point of queer theory is to disrupt norms, practitioners may find it difficult to incorporate this seemingly vague idea into their work with gays and lesbians.

Some gays and lesbians critique queer theory, and one objection "comes from those who cannot accept a once pejorative term as a positive self-description" (Jagose, 1996, p. 103). Because gay and lesbian individuals have historically fought to legitimate their sexual identities, some believe that queer theory actually diminishes the efficacy of their sexual identity categories (Jagose). On the other hand, those who are proponents of queer theory might argue that the term "queer" is becoming too widely used or fashionable. As the term becomes increasingly in vogue, some believe that it loses its radically non-normative meaning (Jagose). This argument also extends to the widespread academic use of queer theory. In the end "queer's impact on identity politics has yet to be determined" (Jagose, p. 126).

## Transformational Learning Theory

A final theory informing this study is transformational learning theory.

Transformational learning theory, proposed by Mezirow and developed further by Freire and other theorists, “is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130). It is aptly titled transformational learning theory because it describes the transformation that occurs through learning, which is defined as making new meanings in life. In this adult learning theory, transformation is considered a developmental progression that is “most often set in motion by a *disorienting dilemma*” (Merriam et al., p. 321) which is “an acute/internal/external personal crisis” (Taylor, 1998, p. 41). Mezirow and Associates (2000) explained that experiencing such a crisis can cause individuals to change their basic worldviews, personal paradigms, or frames of reference. In other words, when our meaning perspectives, which are acquired in childhood from teachers, parents and mentors, are found to be inadequate, they are modified through the transformational learning process.

Mezirow (1995) identified ten phases in transformational learning. Of these ten phases, four are commonly recognized themes or components: centrality of experience, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action (Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor, 1998). Merriam (2004) succinctly described the transformational learning process:

In transformational learning, one’s values, beliefs, and assumptions compose the lens through which personal experience is mediated and made sense of. When this meaning system is found to be inadequate in accommodating some life



experience, through transformational learning it can be replaced with a new perspective. (p. 61)

In this section I will define meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, outline the main steps or components in transformational learning, review literature related to transformational learning theory, discuss the critiques of this theory, and then review the transformative process as it relates to gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

### *Meaning Perspectives and Meaning Schemes*

Mezirow and Associates (2000) explained that all people have meaning structures or ways of thinking about the world. These meaning structures include meaning perspectives, habits of mind, points of view, and meaning schemes. A meaning perspective is “a general frame of reference, world view, or personal paradigm” (Taylor, 1998, p. 6). Acquired early in life through socialization, our frames of reference or meaning perspectives “become more ingrained into our psyche” (Taylor, p. 6) over time. It is through our meaning perspectives that we make sense of the world around us and interpret new experiences. Because these perspectives are ingrained and sometimes subconscious assumptions about ourselves and the world, they are resistant to change (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). It is only when we are presented with “a radically different and incongruent experience [that] cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective” (Taylor, p. 7) that we consider transforming our perspectives.

Frames of references or meaning perspectives are comprised of two components, habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Habits of mind are our broad assumptions that help us interpret new experiences. Examples of habits of mind

include religious doctrines, personality traits, social norms, and beliefs about beauty (Mezirow & Associates). Different from habits of mind, points of view are specific “clusters of meaning schemes” (Mezirow & Associates, p. 18) that express our habits. Essentially, these meaning schemes are “the tangible signs of our habits and expectations that influence and shape a particular behavior or view, such as how we may act when we are around a homeless person or think of a Republican or Democrat” (Taylor, 1998, p. 6). For example, the experience of seeing someone on the street asking for money brings up certain feelings, judgments, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. Taken individually, these are meaning schemes; clustered together, these meaning schemes make up our points of view about the situation. But where do these points of view, or clusters of meaning schemes, come from? Specific points of view about the person on the street originate from our general habits of mind or way of thinking about the world. In this case, our reactions to the situation stem from our general habits of mind about people who ask for money. Finally, both our habits of mind and points of view contribute to our overall worldview or meaning perspective.

Taylor (1998) explained that we frequently change our meaning schemes, and these changes do not necessarily imply a transformational learning experience. For example, an individual, Tommy, might have a racist attitude toward African American people in general. Through interactions with a colleague who is African American, Tommy might change his meaning schemes about his colleague. However, even though Tommy sees his colleague differently, he has not changed his meaning perspective about African Americans in general. With several changes in his meaning schemes about African Americans, Tommy might eventually change his overall perspective. According

to Mezirow and Associates (2000), transformative learning can occur “by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind” (p. 19).

### *Steps in Transformational Learning*

Transformational learning begins “with an experience that one cannot accommodate into the prior life structure” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 145). In transformational learning, such an experience is called a disorienting dilemma. “However, just *having* the experience is not enough. The learner must critically self-examine the assumptions and beliefs that have structured how the experience has been interpreted” (Merriam et al., p. 134).

Critical reflection consists of an assessment of prior assumptions about self, others, and the world. These assumptions and meanings are usually created in childhood, and may stem from authority figures, parents, and friends. During critical reflection, individuals reassess prior learning, which may lead to negation of former beliefs (Mezirow, 1991). This reflection can come in three forms: reflecting on the content of the experience, reflecting on ways to handle the experience, and reflecting on assumptions and beliefs about the experience (Merriam et al., 2007). In transformative learning, individuals utilize critical reflection to make new meanings by synthesizing old meanings with new ideas learned through the crisis or disorienting dilemma; this often results in more inclusive and open beliefs or worldviews (Mercer, 2006).

After critical reflection, individuals validate their newly created meanings through discourse. Discourse occurs when we dialogue with others in order to “weigh evidence for and against the argument and critically assess assumptions” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.

134). Framed via the notion of postmodern identity, discourse can also include conversing with oneself (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). At the end of this phase, “understanding is arrived through the weighing of evidence and measuring the insight and strength of supporting arguments” (Taylor, 1998, p. 10).

The final step in transformative learning is taking action that is fueled by the newly created meanings. This action “can range from making a decision about something to engaging in radical political protest” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 135). Individuals transform their lives based on these new meanings; moreover, “individual transformation leads to social action and social change” (Cranton, 1994, p. 81).

#### *Literature Related to Mezirow's Theory*

In 1998 and 2007, Taylor reviewed the literature related to transformational learning theory. In his first review, Taylor (1998) summarized 45 dissertations and studies completed between 1980 and 1998. In 2007, Taylor again examined the literature on transformative learning, focusing on 40 studies published in peer-reviewed journals. He found less research “about identifying transformative experiences in different settings, and more about fostering transformative learning” (p. 173). This study fell into the first category and furthered the literature on transformative learning by applying the theory to a new population: gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

Transformational learning theory is widely used within the field of adult education. Three sources, in particular, are related to this study. The first is a chapter by King and Biro (2006) entitled “A Transformative Learning Perspective of Continuing Sexual Development in the Workplace.” The authors blended transformational learning theory and Wishik and Pierce's (1991) model of sexual identity development to create

their own model of transformative learning in sexual development. Furthermore, King and Biro applied their model to the workplace issues such as disclosure and career development. Although the chapter focused on the context of work, it can still contribute to this study. The authors claimed that sexual identity development can coincide with transformative learning; however, they did not test their model in the field.

A second source related to this study is Donnelly's (2001) dissertation entitled *Building a New Moral, Religious, or Spiritual Identity: Perspective Transformation in Lesbian Women*. Although I will address Donnelly's research in more depth in the next section, it is important to note here that she utilized transformational learning theory to frame her narrative study of lesbian women who grew up as Christians. Donnelly proposed that "understanding the process of transformational learning will expand to include an underrepresented group, lesbians" (p. 15). Her study focused mostly on the new meaning perspectives made by participants as opposed to the transformative process.

Finally, Mercer (2006) applied transformational learning theory to religious education in congregations. She explained that Sunday School classes can be "places for intensive critical reflection on faith practices . . . where new information, tools of analysis, and perspectives may be brought to bear upon the existing frameworks of persons engaged in Christian ministries" (p. 175). Although Mercer included examples of transformative experiences related to religious education, she did not provide information on *how* pastors, lay people, or congregations can foster transformational learning. This article, though, is one example of how religious identity development can be viewed as a transformative learning experience.

There is an abundance of literature on transformational learning theory. The three sources outlined above provide a starting point for linking transformational learning to sexual and religious identity development. However, this study adds to the literature by using transformational learning theory as a framework for identifying transformations in the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

### *Critiques of Mezirow's Theory*

Transformational learning theory is not without its critics. The first critique of this theory has to do with its emphasis on cognition. Transformational learning theory was proposed for adults, as opposed to children and youth, because of the advanced cognitive skills needed to complete each step of the process (Merriam, 2004). In particular, these skills are useful in the steps of critical reflection and discourse. With its focus on cognition, this theory ignores “the affective, emotional, and social context aspects of the learning process” (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17).

Transformative learning is assumed to be voluntary and self-directed (Cranton, 1994). Looking to authority figures, rather than ourselves, for answers does not promote transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). “We must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others” (Mezirow, p. 5). The theory holds that autonomous thinking is the best way to facilitate transformational learning. Some critics claim that this theory is too individualistic and does not incorporate broad cultural or societal changes (Newman, 1994).

Finally, transformational learning theory assumes that individuals will want or need to make new meanings in life after they go through a crisis. Those who decide to stay with the status quo, or go back to old and comfortable routines, do not understand

the meaning of their experience according to this theory. In other words, if individuals do not change their meaning perspectives or worldviews after experiencing a disorienting dilemma, they have not truly transformed.

*Transformative Learning in Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals*

*With a Christian Upbringing*

It is easy to integrate the process of transformational learning theory with the struggle that gays and lesbians experience regarding their Christian faith and their sexual identity. For many gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity acts as a disorienting dilemma. In fact, Baumgartner (2001) explained that a disorienting dilemma may be a process or a series of experiences rather than a single, isolated event. In experiencing identity conflict, many gay, lesbian, and queer Christians believe that they “are asked to choose between their sexual orientation and their religious and spiritual beliefs” (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001, p. 435). In facing this conflict, some will hide their sexual identity from others, go through counseling in an attempt to reorient or change their sexual orientation (Carlton, 2004), reject their religion, or somehow integrate their religion and sexual identity. Regardless of the path they choose, transformational learning theory explains that individuals can undergo critical reflection when faced with this type of identity conflict.

As they engage in critical reflection, gay, lesbian, and queer Christians may begin to question their religious beliefs. Those who are confident of and have subsequently disclosed their sexual identity might attempt to discover the origins of Christian beliefs about homosexuality by talking to people in their churches, reading books at their local

libraries, or looking online for answers (Webster, 1998). Others, however, might not seek answers for fear that their search will unintentionally reveal their homosexuality to others; these individuals could remain in critical reflection indefinitely (Sears, 1991). In fact, it is through this reflection that gay, lesbian, and queer Christians will either integrate or chose between their religion and their sexual identity (Buchanan et al., 2001). They may reject their old beliefs that homosexuality is a sin which will lead to new beliefs that their church and/or the Bible are not 100% correct (Yip, 2003). New beliefs, or new meanings, will emerge about themselves, their world, their church, and their God. In Yip's (2003) study of the religious beliefs of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians, one participant, Nick, explained his new perspective: "Church authority frequently is wrong and frequently does fail to take account of the variety of experience. And, of course, the issue of sexuality is an example of that" (Yip, p. 150).

In discourse, newly created meanings undergo scrutiny and validation. Often, coming into this stage, new meanings are "highly subjective and changeable" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 134). People will need to, in a sense, examine and debate these new meanings with themselves and others in order to validate them. Individually this can be accomplished by journaling one's thoughts and feelings. However, for those who are in a more supportive environment, discourse is typically completed with at least one other person, such as a therapist, friend, family member, teacher, pastor, mentor, or even a stranger in an online chat room. Regardless of how discourse is undertaken, at the end of this stage, new meanings are validated. In Shallenberger's (1996) study of the spiritual journeys of gays and lesbians, a participant, Beth, described her newly created meanings:



The way I grew up [within a Conservative Christian household] left me no place to be as a lesbian. I had to abandon it because I knew I existed. I mean, how do you sustain a belief in something that says you're not? It's kind of strange. (p. 195)

The final step in transformational learning theory is action. For gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, action can include rejecting Christianity totally, and possibly finding and following some new, more accepting, religion or spiritual practice. On the other hand, individuals may continue to follow Christianity in a modified way, possibly leaving their church. Another action may be educating Christians about sexuality, which might simply mean coming out to individuals in the church community. This disclosure, on its own, may create some sort of discourse and change within the community. In addition, gay, lesbian, and queer Christians may be inspired to create a formal or informal support network for others in their area (Shallenberger, 1996). Finally, if there is little encouragement and continued discrimination, some may be inclined to move out of their communities into more supportive environments.

#### Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals With a Christian Upbringing

Throughout this chapter I have reviewed literature related to Fowler's stages of faith, Cass' theory of sexual identity development, and Mezirow's transformational learning theory. This section will include research specifically about gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. At the present time, literature on this topic is scarce, which is reflected in this section. Current research can be divided into three interrelated categories: the spiritual and religious beliefs of gay and lesbian Christians, the influence of gay-positive Christian churches, and the process of identity integration.

### *Spiritual and Religious Beliefs*

There are many books and testimonials about being gay or lesbian, and spiritual or religious, in today's society. White and White (2004) reviewed six of these works published between 1972 and 1996. From the autobiography of Reverend Troy D. Perry, founder of MCC, to *The Preacher's Son*, a memoir of one person's quest for love, White and White found themes of theological innovation, coming out, denominational context, and political influences. The "gay spiritual autobiographies chronicle and are defined by the difficulties inherent in reconciling Christian and gay identities" (White & White, p. 203). In particular, reconciling religious and sexual identities included forming individual theology, disclosing sexuality to others, managing denominational background, and taking political action. This review informs this study by illustrating experiences of gay Christians as they manage their sexual and religious identities.

Two additional studies, both from Andrew K. T. Yip, have chronicled the spiritual and religious beliefs of gay and lesbian Christians. In one, Yip (1998) interviewed 60 gay male Christians in the United Kingdom about their perceptions of the Christian community. A majority of the participants were highly critical of the institutionalized church (referring mostly to the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church) and perceived it to be homophobic (Yip). Some individuals were optimistic that the church would become more accepting over time, while others saw the church as extremely resistant to change. In general, local congregations were identified as more understanding and open when compared to church hierarchy. For example, one participant, Robert, said that "the church in its public image is homophobic. But in practice at the individual congregation level, there is a great deal of variety" (Yip, p. 43).

Although this study highlighted the diverse beliefs of the participants, individuals were recruited through three gay Christian organizations, which excluded people who might not be active in their church communities. In this study, I utilized Yip's work by being aware of differences in participants' beliefs about the institutionalized church and local congregations.

In a second study, Yip (2003) analyzed "the religious beliefs of 565 gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians [in Great Britain], focusing on God, Jesus Christ and the Bible" (p. 137). Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Yip sent out 17-page questionnaires with closed- and open-ended questions and completed semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 61 individuals. The sample was not representative as a majority of the participants were white (98.4%) and there were only 131 lesbians (23.2%) and 45 bisexuals (8%) involved in the study. Most of the participants "saw no conflict between their sexualities and their Christian faith" (Yip, p. 137), but, similar to Yip's (1998) earlier study, they were highly critical of the institutionalized church. Participants tended to view the Bible as relevant to their lives, and believed that one cannot always interpret the Bible literally (Yip, 2003). Yip's findings underscored the distinctions between personal Christian faith, attitudes toward the church, and beliefs about the Bible. These distinctions were important as I interviewed participants in this study.

In summary, as they develop spiritual and religious beliefs, many gay and lesbian Christians become critical of institutionalized religion. They tend to reject the homophobic beliefs of the church, and instead focus on their own Christian beliefs and faith. The literature about this population provides a glimpse into ways in which some people resolve the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity. These studies,

however, are limited in that they exclude the experiences of individuals who no longer profess the Christian faith.

### *Gay-Positive Christian Churches*

In addition to examining the beliefs of gay and lesbian Christians, some researchers have investigated the influence of gay-positive churches. Two studies analyzed pro-gay, lesbian, and queer Christian congregations associated with the Metropolitan Community Churches. First, Lukenbill (1998) completed a “naturalistic study based on analysis of archival and other data of the corporate culture of the Metropolitan Community Church of Austin, Inc.” (p. 440). In this study, corporate culture referred to shared normative values held by Austin’s MCC. Lukenbill employed participant observation over a period of three years and was invited by the church to “locate and organize the church’s archives dating from 1975 to 1989” (p. 442). Although he did not describe methods of analysis used in this study, Lukenbill explained that the following themes were present in the corporate culture of MCC in Austin:

Actions directed at positive identity formation and self-esteem enhancement;  
study and dissemination of a theology based on historical-critical analysis;  
religious ceremony, preaching and ministry which recognizes its legitimacy as a  
Christian church; commitment to social and political actions in terms of human  
and political rights; fostering of friendship and bonding among members;  
recognizing and dealing with internal conflict; and development of a sense of  
historical importance. (p. 440)

Lukenbill illustrated each of these themes with examples. For instance, MCC promoted positive identity formation and self-esteem during its service’s call to worship:

“We give thanks for God’s unique love and we refuse to be limited by the shame the world tries to impose on us” (Lukenbill, p. 448). In general, this study highlighted the importance of MCC for many gay, lesbian, and queer individuals as they negotiate their sexual and religious identities.

A second study of MCC was Rodriguez and Ouellette’s (2000) mixed methods research at MCC of New York. The authors explored 40 church members’ experiences of sexual and religious identity integration. Through surveys and interviews, Rodriguez and Ouellette found that church involvement was highly correlated with identity integration of gay and lesbian Christians. Further, “MCC/NY played an important role in helping these participants achieve integration between their homosexual and religious identities” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, p. 333). Key interview questions addressed information about being both gay or lesbian and Christian. Although the authors noted that identity development is an on-going and complex process, transcript coders assessed the extent of identity integration as either fully integrated or not fully integrated. Coding data using the binary of fully integrated or not fully integrated, though, does not allow for the complexities of identity development in a postmodern world. Further, this type of analysis promotes an essentialist, unitary notion of identity.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, McQueeney (2003) studied two mainline Protestant churches that were “explicitly committed to welcoming and affirming openly lesbian and gay people into Christian community” (p. 6). Her research explored ways in which church members “sought to resignify [or revise] . . . *sexual identity* so as to make it compatible with Christianity” (p. 12). McQueeney completed interviews with 21 gay and lesbian church members and 4 church pastors. In addition to the interviews,

she examined documents associated with the churches. Using a grounded theory analysis, McQueeney found several rhetorical strategies used by the church to help participants deal with their identity dilemmas. These included minimizing sexual identity by defining it as secondary to Christian identity, normalizing sexual identity by reinforcing common values (regardless of sexuality) of parenthood and monogamy, and infusing sexual identity with morality by trying to end discrimination. This study provided a comprehensive look at the ways in which participants changed their sexual identities in order to make them compatible with religious identities, especially in the context of gay-positive churches. However, the author did not provide information about how participants modified their religious identities to be compatible with their sexual identities. By omitting this crucial piece, McQueeney's study failed to explore the entirety of identity integration.

To summarize, these three studies highlighted the influences of gay-positive Christian churches. These churches are concerned with and are actively involved in the identity development of their members. Unlike many other denominations, these congregations acknowledge the compatibility between Christianity and homosexuality, thus providing a forum, safe haven, and spiritual home for gay, lesbian, and queer Christians. Reviewing the literature on gay-positive Christian churches has aided in my understanding of their crucial role in the lives of many gay, lesbian, and queer Christians.

*The Process of Resolving Conflict between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs*

Buchanan et al. (2001) described the outcomes of "the struggle that gays and lesbians face as they incorporate their sexual orientation and identity within the context of an existing religious or spiritual identity" (p. 435). Reviewing the literature on the

subject, the authors concluded that gays and lesbians either choose between or integrate their “two worlds” (p. 440). In other words, individuals are faced with a choice—reject homosexuality, reject Christianity, integrate these two identities, or live with the dilemma. In addition to these outcomes, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) added compartmentalization as a strategy for dealing with homosexual and religious identity conflict. In compartmentalization, conflicting ideas are kept separate, and conflict resolution or identity consonance is achieved. For example, individuals might keep their homosexual identity from their church community while, at the same time, keeping their Christian identity from the gay community.

Along with looking at the outcomes of conflict between religion or spirituality and homosexuality, six research studies have examined the process of resolving this conflict. In the first, Mahaffy (1996) studied “the effects of a Christian identity on self-reported dissonance, and the relationship between source of dissonance and its resolution” (p. 392) for lesbian Christians. This quantitative study included survey results from 186 women. Mahaffy explained that cognitive dissonance can be experienced internally or externally. Internal dissonance refers to a conflict between participants’ beliefs and their sexuality while external dissonance signifies a conflict between others’ (family, church, friends, public) beliefs and the participants’ homosexuality. In this study, an evangelical identity represented a belief in the infallibility of the Bible and a devotion to Jesus Christ. This evangelical identity “predicted both internal and external dissonance, although the likelihood of experiencing internal dissonance was higher” (Mahaffy, p. 392). Participants identified strategies they used to resolve cognitive dissonance, including modifying religious beliefs and leaving

the church (Mahaffy). Some explained that they just continued to live with the dissonance. Mahaffy's research did not incorporate details of participants' resolutions or the processes by which they resolved cognitive dissonances.

In a second study related to the process of identity integration, Shallenberger (1996) sought to understand the ways in which gays and lesbians viewed their spiritual journeys. He distributed 300 surveys to identify participants for in-depth interviews. Utilizing maximum-variation sampling, 26 individuals from a variety of spiritual and religious traditions were selected to participate in the open-ended interviews. Lasting up to five hours over two sessions, interviews focused on the life stories of participants, all of whom identified spirituality as a very important part of their lives. Their stories were an interweaving of their coming out process with their spiritual journeys, and "highlighted the period of questioning, reclaiming, and reintegration that happens for many as they resolve their sense of themselves as sexual and spiritual" (p. 195). This study only included the experiences of individuals that identified as spiritual or religious and excluded those who left the Christian faith altogether.

In a third study, Thumma (1991) examined "the process by which persons reconstruct their Evangelical religious identity to include the formerly incongruent homosexual identity" (p. 333). Participants in Thumma's study were members of a conservative gay Christian organization in Atlanta, Georgia known as Good News. The goal of Good News is to help its members find their core identities as gay, Evangelical Christians (Thumma). For this study data were collected by participant observations of 20 Good News meetings, in-depth interviews with 7 members, and document analysis. Thumma, rather than presenting in-depth information about individuals' processes of



identity integration, discussed the steps taken by Good News to help its members in the process. These steps included assuring individuals that having a gay Christian identity is possible, presenting doctrines to support the gay Christian identity, facilitating “integration of the new gay Christian identity” (p. 341) through evangelistic activities and social interactions, and maintaining the new identity. Identity maintenance was accomplished by devaluing the previous identity, acknowledging minority status, promoting religiosity, emphasizing adherence to doctrine, and framing “change as a spiritual journey” (p. 343). Although this study focused primarily on the ministries of Good News to gay Christians, it provided information regarding the process of identity integration.

In a fourth study, Donnelly’s (2001) narrative study investigated the process by which lesbians negotiated transformation “in their spiritual, moral, and religious lives, when their religious beliefs and their development as lesbians are incongruent” (p. 14). Donnelly mailed 160 questionnaires, of which only 25 were returned. Of these 25, only 17 included all the components necessary for analysis; two questionnaires were damaged in the mail, one participant did not fit the criteria of the study, and two narratives were “too brief to qualify as true narratives” (Donnelly, p. 156). Due to the anonymity of the participants, the researcher was not able to follow up with any questions or concerns. Questionnaires asked individuals to provide narratives or stories of their experiences dealing with the conflict between their religious beliefs and sexual identity. Narrative analysis revealed that participants fell into one of five categories: conservative deny-ers who rejected lesbian identity, deeply involved therapeutics who could not accept the lesbian label, moral rationalizers who found strength in being moral people, empathic

liberals who had little trouble integrating their identities, and multifaceted conflicted individuals who experienced many other stressful conflicts. Donnelly's findings demonstrated the various paths that individuals take in negotiating lesbian and Christian identities. However, her dissertation focused on participants' identifications at that time rather than on the process by which individuals resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

In the fifth study, Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) examined the influence affirming faith experiences had on the mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. In this research, affirming faith experiences were those that supported participants' sexual identities. The authors surveyed 583 gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals involved with a faith group about their faith experiences, internalized homonegativity, spirituality, and psychological health. Lease et al. found that "participants who experience affirmation from their faith groups have increased psychological health through greater spirituality and decreased homonegativity" (p. 385). However, because the researchers only surveyed individuals who were actively involved in churches, people who left the faith due to negative experiences were excluded.

In the sixth and final study, Beckstead and Morrow (2004) explored Mormon clients' experiences of conversion or reorientation therapy. This grounded theory study included 50 Mormon participants who went through this type of therapy in an effort to change their sexual orientation. The researchers interviewed both individuals who were proponents and opponents of reorientation therapy. In other words, the study incorporated clients who believed this therapy worked for them as well as those who explained that the therapy failed. Beckstead and Morrow generated theories regarding

the process leading clients to enter into conversion therapy and the process by which clients found congruence during and after conversion therapy. Although this study focused on reorientation therapy, it relates to my dissertation in at least two ways. First, Beckstead and Morrow provided a detailed methodological roadmap for how to complete grounded theory research. Second, the process by which participants found congruence may hold true for participants who do not undergo reorientation therapy. The process consisted of becoming aware of being different, adopting labels, experiencing mixed emotion, cycling with maladaptive coping, hitting bottom, searching for understanding and help, reorientation therapy, positive and negative experiences with therapy, gaining a different perspective, swaying between divergent identities, developing self-acceptance, and consolidating a positive self-identity. Although this study concentrated solely on the experiences of Mormons who went through reorientation therapy, the process may be similar for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds who have not undertaken this therapy.

In summary, research reveals that gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing commonly experience identity conflicts. Typically, individuals deal with this conflict by either rejecting their homosexual identity, rejecting their Christian identity, integrating these two identities, compartmentalizing, or living with the conflict. Although some studies (Donnelly, 2001; Mahaffy, 1996; Shallenberger, 1996; Thumma, 1991) highlight the questioning and confusion experienced by individuals during this conflict, little research examines the process of conflict resolution. Of the studies that do focus on process, none includes participants that call themselves Christians and those that have left the faith.

This research fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the *process* by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. Unlike other studies, I included both gay, lesbian, and queer Christians as well as those who have left the church or no longer identify as Christian. By including a maximum variation sample of participants, I was able to better account for differences in individuals' journeys and formulate a theory of this process that is inclusive and informative. Furthermore, utilizing a postmodern notion of identity, I was able to bring a fresh perspective to this literature. Rather than viewing identity as fixed, unitary, and stable, I incorporated the notion of a fluid, ever-changing, and complex identity. I did not try to find a point of resolution for this conflict. Instead, I focused on the process, inviting participants to share their experiences of transformation thus far.

### Chapter Summary

In a postmodern world, identity is multi-faceted, fluid, and ever-changing. Although scholars have proposed stage theories of faith development (Fowler, 1981) and sexual identity development (Cass, 1979), identity, from a postmodern perspective, is constantly changing. Identity development is never complete. When faced with a conflict between aspects of identity, such as religion and sexual orientation, individuals act and react in various ways. People experience conflict differently based on who they are. Identity conflicts can often serve as a disorienting dilemma, propelling change. It is through these conflicts that we can negotiate who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Finally, individuals who experience this conflict may transform their lives, as described by Mezirow (1991) in transformational learning.

With the majority of mainline Christian denominations condemning homosexuality as a sin, gay, lesbian, and queer individuals must negotiate their sexual and religious identity development. The literature identified various strategies of identity development, including compartmentalization, rejecting religion, rejecting sexuality, or integrating religion and sexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Few studies actually examined the process by which individuals resolve the sexual and religious identity conflict. In addition to a neglect of process, the existing research does not typically incorporate postmodern notions of identity and the idea that identity development continues to occur over the lifespan. This research filled a gap in the literature by specifically focusing on the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. This chapter provides the methodology used for exploring the following research questions:

1. How do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?
2. What personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?
3. What is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and
4. How do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

#### Design of the Study

Literature is available on how gay, lesbian, and queer Christians have made sense of their sexual identity and spirituality or religion. A majority of research with this population utilizes qualitative research methods. Common characteristics of qualitative research include: understanding created meanings, working in the field, being sensitive to personal biography, having a flexible design, employing the researcher as the data collection instrument, researching inductively, and having a purposeful small sample (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Padgett, 1998; Salahu-Din, 2003). Padgett concluded that qualitative work should be done when one wants to “explore a topic about which

little is known . . . pursuing a topic of sensitivity and emotional depth . . . to capture the ‘lived experience’ from the perspectives of those who live it and create meaning from it” (pp. 7-8). Although some research has focused on the result of the conflict experienced by gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing, I explored a topic about which little was known—the *process* by which individuals resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious upbringing. Because this study sought to understand the lived experience and perspectives of gay, lesbian, and queer Christians, qualitative methodology was a good fit.

Creswell (2007) identified five approaches to qualitative inquiry and research design: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study research. For this dissertation research, I utilized a grounded theory design. Grounded theory is a type of qualitative research methodology that concentrates on generating and/or discovering theory (Creswell, 2007). “Simply stated, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2).

Grounded theory came out of the field of sociology, particularly from Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s (1967) research on dying. This approach to qualitative research combined the two competing sociological traditions of positivism and pragmatism (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser was trained at Columbia University under the positivist tradition, and he “imbued grounded theory with dispassionate empiricism, rigorous codified methods, emphasis on emergent discoveries, and its somewhat ambiguous specialized language that echoes quantitative methods” (Charmaz, p. 7). Strauss, on the other hand, was trained at the University of Chicago under the pragmatist

tradition. Pragmatism is the basis for symbolic interactionism, which assumes that society, reality, and self rely on language and are constructed through communication (Charmaz). Glaser and Strauss merged their backgrounds in positivism and pragmatism to form the theoretical foundations of grounded theory.

As opposed to deductive analytic methods which start with a hypothesis or theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed the use of inductive analytic methods. Inductive analysis involves allowing the data to inform the development of theory without any preconceived hypotheses (Ezzy, 2002). Essentially, “theory is built up from observation. . . . Theory is ‘grounded’ in data” (Ezzy, p. 12). In an era of quantitative research, Glaser and Strauss legitimized qualitative methods and inductive analysis in their landmark book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Since their development of grounded theory in the 1960s, researchers have written about, clarified, and even changed aspects of this theory. Strauss joined with Juliet Corbin to move to a more methodical and post-positivist type of grounded theory (Hallberg, 2006). Glaser, in response, has criticized Strauss and Corbin’s approach as too prescribed and structured (Creswell, 2007).

In addition to the work of Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin, Charmaz (2006) has introduced constructivist grounded theory. Constructivists acknowledge that researchers affect data and that data and analysis should be understood in the context of time, place, situation, and culture (Charmaz). The constructivist view is critical of the objectivist position, which holds that data are real and unaffected by context. In this study, I utilized Charmaz’s constructivist approach to grounded theory. This approach enabled me to examine issues of power and privilege in the research relationship as well as the context of sexuality in our society. Constructivist grounded theory produces interpretive theories,



which are explanations of the data based on the researcher's views. Charmaz promoted the formation of interpretive theories, explaining that positivist ones "can result in narrow, reductionist explanations with simplistic models of action" (p. 126). By emphasizing the phenomena of study rather than explanation and prediction, interpretive theories call for "the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon. This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities" (Charmaz, p. 126). Charmaz listed the defining components of grounded theory practice as:

simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses; using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis; advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis; memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps; sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness; [and] conducting the literature review *after* developing an independent analysis. (pp. 5-6)

In this study, I conducted the literature review *before* analyzing my data, which is common for Ph.D. students. Through memo writing and peer review, which will be discussed near the end of this chapter, I was able to put any pre-conceived notions aside during analysis. Because I had several findings which were surprising to me, I believe that I was successful in this endeavor.

The practice of grounded theory focuses on process, which made it a good fit for this study. The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay,

lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious upbringing. Charmaz explained that grounded theory coding helps to answer process questions such as:

- What process(es) is at issue here? How can I define it?
- How does this process develop?
- How does the research participant(s) act while involved in this process?
- What does the research participant(s) profess to think and feel while involved in this process? What might his or her observed behavior indicate?
- When, why, and how does the process change?
- What are the consequences of the process? (p. 51)

These questions about process relate back to the purpose of my dissertation and helped me address a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

In addition to a focus on process, constructivist grounded theory methodology produces theories that connect local worlds to structures in society (Charmaz, 2006). Because this study examined the intersection of Christianity and gay, lesbian, and queer identity, focusing on the unique experiences of participants as well as structures in society was important. This research also troubled the notion of identity categories and explored “the myriad complexities of the construct, identity, and how identities reproduce and ‘perform’ in social forums” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 28-29). Rather than using a preconceived theory of identity development, I generated a theory grounded in the participants’ experiences and constructs.

### Sample Selection

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) maintained that “criterion-based selection is the starting point for all research” (p. 69). For this study, participants met all of the following criteria: (a) be at least 18 years old; (b) have at least a high school education, GED, or equivalent; (c) live within a 3-hour car drive from Athens, Georgia; (d) self-identify as gay, lesbian, or queer; (e) have a Christian upbringing; (f) have experienced and addressed conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity; (g) be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview, lasting no more than 120 minutes; and (h) be willing to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary. This follow-up interview was by phone and did not exceed 30 minutes.

There is a rationale behind these selection criteria. I required participants to be at least 18 years old for two reasons. First, individuals under 18 may lack the ability to deeply reflect upon identity conflicts. Adams et al. (2000) explained that:

Though the foundation of identity is laid in the experiences of childhood, younger children lack the physical and cognitive development needed to reflect on the self in this abstract way. The adolescent capacity for self-reflection (and resulting self-consciousness) allows one to ask, “Who am I now?” “Who was I before?”

“Who will I become?” (p. 10)

Second, given parental consent and Institutional Review Board guidelines, I had easier access to the population of individuals over age 18. I asked that participants have a high school education or equivalent because of the need for significant self-reflection and awareness. For convenience, individuals were required to live within a three-hour car drive from Athens. Based on the purpose of my dissertation, participants self-identified

as gay, lesbian or queer; having a Christian upbringing; and having experienced conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity. Because I studied the *process* by which people resolve this conflict, I looked specifically for participants who have addressed or resolved some aspect of this conflict. Lastly, individuals were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) provided a description of various selection techniques, including forms used early in a study, such as snowball sampling, comprehensive selection, maximum-variation selection, extreme case, typical case, unique case, reputational case, ideal-typical case, and comparable case. Additional forms utilized later in a study include negative case, discrepant case, theoretical sampling, and sequential sampling. Some of these selection strategies were impossible for this dissertation research. For example, comprehensive selection includes examining every case in a population (LeCompte & Preissle). Snowball and convenience sampling, on the other hand, would have been relatively easy to implement. These methods include selecting participants based on ease of availability and eliciting participants' help in recruitment and referral (Padgett, 1998). However, "because new sample members are generated through existing ones, there is clearly a danger that the diversity of the sample frame is compromised" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 94) in snowball sampling.

Based on the purpose of my dissertation, I began the study using maximum-variation selection. This is a purposive strategy "in which you intentionally sample research participants for the specific perspectives they may have" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). The goal of maximum-variation selection is "to include phenomena which vary widely from each other . . . to identify central themes which cut across the variety of

cases or people” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 79). Because I was interested in generating a theory regarding the process of conflict resolution for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, having participants who experienced this process differently was important. For instance, a “theory” of the process of conflict resolution would not be complete if it only included individuals who continue to follow and believe in Christianity. Maximum-variation selection ensured that this study also incorporated participants who had left the Christian church, no longer believe in God, or consider themselves to be spiritual rather than religious. In addition, I attempted to include individuals with various ages, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religious upbringings (denominations), and so forth. For example, the majority of initial participants were Caucasian individuals; in response, I made efforts to recruit people of color. I sent out a second “wave” of recruitment materials, asking particularly for responses from people of color. As the study progressed, the sampling strategy evolved from maximum-variation to theoretical sampling.

Theoretical sampling includes “seeking pertinent data to *develop* your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). In other words, grounded theorists seek out particular types of data based on categories in which they need more information or varied information. Theoretical sampling can consist of looking for different participants and situations to inform emerging categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Scott & Morrison, 2006). Towards the end of data collection, I recruited two participants with very different religious upbringings: Lutheran and Free Will Baptist. By comparing the experiences of these two with the rest of the sample, I was able to advance my analysis

regarding the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. This is typical of theoretical sampling, which involves choosing informants, interactions, and episodes based on concepts rather than representativeness (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is a purposeful way for researchers to ensure they have enough information about the categories and codes in their data.

But what is enough information? How do researchers know when they can stop collecting data? There is not a definitive answer to that question. However, when researchers can no longer glean new insights from data, they have reached what is known as saturation. Charmaz (2006) explained that the term saturation is commonly defined as finding nothing new. At the point of saturation, researchers can stop collecting data. Because I could not know ahead of time when I would reach this point, I estimated the number of participants for this study to be 15 to 18, an approximation that is common for grounded theory studies (Boyd & Gumley, 2007; LaRocco, 2007; Reybold, 1996). At 13 participants, I felt as though I had reached saturation, but I included 2 additional individuals just to be sure.

Where did I find all of these participants? A recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) served as an “advertisement” for participation in this study. I utilized electronic recruitment as well as hard copies of the flyers, which I sent or posted to pro-gay, lesbian, and queer churches, bookstores, organizations, and student groups. I also posted flyers in various locations across the campus of a university in the Southeastern United States, and these flyers were helpful in recruiting five of the study participants. At the beginning of data collection, word of mouth was also important. Several colleagues served as entrees into the communities of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals; their “promotion” was

essential at the onset of the study. Based on my contact with these colleagues, I was able to recruit five of the study participants.

I made sure that interested individuals had a copy of my recruitment flyer (see Appendix B), which had information about the study's purpose, the criteria for participation, confidentiality, the honorarium, and how to contact me. Once I was contacted by prospective participants, I utilized a 5-10 minute pre-screening interview (see Appendix C) by phone to ensure that they met all of the criteria. The screening served several purposes for this study. It provided a forum for me to disclose my straight sexual identity and explain to callers why I was interested in this line of research. Disclosure was important as I did not want participants to feel as though they were deceived regarding my sexual identity. Individuals focused more on my interest in the research than in my sexual identity, and my identity did not seem to matter to the participants. Additionally, this screening enabled me to select individuals based on maximum-variation and theoretical sampling.

As a final note, I took time during the screening to ask participants this question: "On a scale of one to five, with one being low involvement and five being high involvement, how involved were you in your church?" Initially, I had planned on asking individuals about their church involvement at the beginning of the face-to-face interview, but then decided to include this question in the pre-screening. Not only did this give me additional time during the face-to-face interview, but it also allowed me to get a sense of how important faith was in participants' childhoods. All explained that they were very involved in their churches, and gave answers of four or five. If I had received a lower answer of one or two, I would have asked that individual to provide more information

regarding the conflict they experienced between sexual identity and religious beliefs. It is certainly possible that someone could experience this conflict without being very involved in church activities. In fact, it would have been interesting to compare the experiences of individuals who were and were not involved in church activities.

### Data Collection

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that “an interview is a purposeful conversation” (p. 103). Interviews can be highly structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. The continuum runs from highly structured interviews, which include preset questions, to unstructured interviews, which have no preset questions and are highly flexible. For this dissertation research, I utilized semi-structured interviews, which are the type used most often in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews provide comparable data across participants without being so rigid that their stories are lost in the process (Bogdan & Biklen). Because this research explored a variety of potentially emotional and personal topics, developing rapport was important to the interview process. For this reason, I employed a conversational style of interviewing, using my interview guide (see Appendix D) only as a reference. Even though I provided some structure to the interview by guiding the sequence of questions, I also allowed for flexibility in the conversation. Bogdan and Biklen explained that “qualitative interviews offer the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (p. 104). With this flexibility, participants were able to tell their stories in their own words.

How did these semi-structured interviews fit into the context of a grounded theory study? Grounded theory methods allow for intensive and in-depth interviews with



participants. Charmaz (2006) provided guidance for how to carry out a grounded theory interview: “Devise a few broad, open-ended questions. Then you can focus your interview questions to invite detailed discussion of a topic. By creating open-ended, non-judgmental questions, you encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (p. 26). Intensive interviewing fits well with grounded theory methods because both “are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (Charmaz, p. 26).

For this study, I conducted two interviews in March of 2007 and the remaining interviews over a 12-week period, from December 16, 2007 until March 8, 2008. Because of the emotional nature of these interviews, I thought that participants would feel more comfortable in a familiar environment. Therefore, interviews took place at a site convenient and comfortable for both me and the participant, often in a quiet room in the building where I work or in the participant’s home.

In these in-depth interviews I learned about participants’ experiences and the meanings they have made about those experiences (Seidman, 1998). The initial face-to-face interview lasted no more than 120 minutes, and, if necessary, there was to be a follow-up interview. Although in-depth follow-up interviews were not needed, I did contact a couple of participants via e-mail or phone to seek clarification. In the initial interview I talked with participants about their Christian upbringings; gay, lesbian, or queer identities; and the process by which they resolve conflicts between sexual identity and religious beliefs. In an effort to preserve the information gleaned from the interviews, I audio taped the sessions. The audio tapes were later transcribed verbatim either by me or by a transcription service and then coded for analysis. Because of my

background in social work and family therapy, I knew that this conflict might be difficult for some participants to discuss. Therefore, I incorporated debriefing at the end of each interview. During this time I gave participants a debriefing form in case they experienced stress and wanted to seek further help from a therapist or counselor (see Appendix E). The form provided information about counselors and helping professionals in the surrounding area who specialize in matters of religion, spirituality, and sexuality.

### Data Analysis

Coding and creating categories can be difficult strategies to understand and practice. However, they are central to the practice of grounded theory. Grounded theorists use coding as a way to reduce data to a manageable size in order to provide an accurate representation. Coding in “grounded theory is the process of identifying themes or concepts that are in the data. . . . Theory emerges through this coding process” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 86). In fact, coding provides a vital link between data collection and theory development (Charmaz, 2006). But how exactly do researchers go about coding data? More often than not, it depends on the researcher!

Typically, the first step in grounded theory coding is to do initial or open coding, which includes remaining “open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities we can discern in the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). Instead of bringing pre-existing ideas to the data, grounded theorists create codes that represent the actual data. Charmaz advised to “remain open, stay close to the data, keep your codes simple and precise, construct short codes, preserve actions, compare data with data, (and) move quickly through the data” (p. 49). Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that open coding includes writing the codes or labels beside the line or paragraph. To complete initial coding, I reviewed the

transcript data word-by-word, line-by-line, and page-by-page and wrote down code words or phrases that came from the data. These codes were often participants' own words; grounded theorists "generally refer to codes of participants' special terms as *in vivo* codes" (Charmaz, p. 55). After completing the open coding process, I moved on to focused coding.

Focused coding "means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Essentially, I sampled the abstract categories that I found in open coding to identify larger, core categories. As noted by Merriam (1998), categories should be reflective of the study's purpose, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent. Although many individuals find software programs helpful for analysis, for me, focused coding was easily accomplished using the highlight function in Microsoft Word. I went through each transcript, highlighting the categories that I found in open coding.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) also espoused a third stage in coding, axial coding. Axial coding "relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). This type of coding demonstrates how codes fit around an axis of different categories and how the relationships of codes and categories are intertwined. Through axial coding, I took the phenomenon of interest and attempted "to identify its dimensions, its consequences, and its relationships with other phenomenon" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 49). This process

helped me understand the categories as they related to one another instead of looking at each one independently. Glaser utilized theoretical coding, which is similar to axial coding, to show the relationships between the categories found in focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Ezzy (2002) explained that “selective coding or theoretical coding involves the identification of the core category or story around which the analysis focuses” (p. 92). I found this level of coding the most difficult, and continually tried to both immerse myself in the data and step away from it in order to identify the core category. I also read other grounded theory research to familiarize myself with this idea of a core category. For example, in Reybold’s (1996) dissertation research on the epistemological development of Malaysian women, “the central theme, or theoretical core, that emerged from the data is the antagonistic relationship between the cultural model of self and the personal model of self” (p. 132). In Beckstead and Morrow’s (2004) study of Mormon clients’ experiences of conversion or reorientation therapy, one overarching core category was “becoming aware of being different” (p. 660).

Coding distills and sorts data “and gives us a handle for making comparisons with other segments of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). These comparisons were important as I constructed multiple codes and categories. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method compares data for similarities and differences. “Comparisons allow data to be grouped and differentiated, as categories are identified and various pieces of data are grouped together” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 90). Using this method, I compared data with data, across participants, pieces of transcripts, across the data set, and so forth (Charmaz).

Another important way for grounded theorists to develop codes and comparisons is through memo writing. Researchers often use memos as a “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). Memo writing is important to grounded theory because it helps researchers integrate analysis into the data collection process (Charmaz). My memos came in many forms, including free-style writing and visual charts and pictures. In short, memos helped me develop descriptions about codes, categories, and data. All of these strategies, including coding and writing memos, are examples of how I simultaneously collected and analyzed the data.

As a result of this analysis, I generated “a theory (complete with a diagram and hypotheses) of actions, interactions, or processes through interrelating categories of information based on data collected from individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). This theory is “a substantive-level theory, written by a researcher close to a specific problem or population of people” (Creswell, p. 67). I also provide a visual representation which illustrates the process by which participants resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. This process includes overarching core categories to which other categories are related.

### Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are just as important in qualitative research as they are in quantitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994) said it best: “How will you, or anyone else, know whether the finally emerging findings are *good*?” (p. 277). In qualitative research, reliability and validity are synonymous with the concept of trustworthiness

(Padgett, 1998). For this research, I took certain steps, as outlined below, to ensure internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

### *Internal Validity*

Maxwell (2005) defined validity as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 106). Merriam (1998) outlined six strategies to enhance internal validity: triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination, participatory or collaborative modes of research, and clarifying researcher’s biases. In this study I utilized triangulation, peer examinations, member checks, and a subjectivity statement that explicated my biases and assumptions.

Triangulation, according to Mathison (1988), is using “multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings” (p. 13), and can result in convergence, inconsistency, or contradiction. According to Denzin (as cited in Mathison, 1988) there are four methods of triangulation: data, investigator, theoretical, and methodological. For this study, I utilized both data and theoretical triangulation. Data triangulation meant having more than one participant in this study; this strategy enhanced the internal validity of the research by including perspectives from 15 individuals. Additionally, there was no one theoretical framework that lent itself to the diverse material; therefore, I included several. This theoretical triangulation allowed me to think about the data from multiple perspectives, focusing on sexual identity development, religious identity development, and transformational learning.

Every stage of the study included some form of peer examination. Peer examination is simply asking peers to comment on emerging findings (Merriam, 1998).

Because this is my dissertation research, my doctoral committee reviewed and examined my analysis and findings. This committee is made up of four individuals from three different disciplines with a wide range of expertise and experience.

I also used member checks to safeguard internal validity. Member checks are basically “taking data collected from study participants, and the tentative interpretations of these data, back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if the interpretations are plausible, if they ‘ring true’” (Merriam, 1995, p. 54). Also known as respondent validation, member checks allowed me to guard against misinterpretations and biases (Maxwell, 2005). I sent all of the participants their individual participant descriptions as well as the entire analysis for review. I received responses from all 15 participants regarding their individual descriptions and 6 regarding the analysis. All of these replies were positive and confirmed my analysis.

Finally, I included a statement of my experiences, assumptions, and biases in the final report. Subjectivity statements are common in qualitative research, and they help the reader understand the researcher’s position (Creswell, 2007). My statement of subjectivity is at the end of this chapter and includes information about my experiences and beliefs related to Christianity and homosexuality.

### *External Validity*

External validity, or generalizability, refers to “the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 1995, p. 57). However, in qualitative research, “a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely *because* the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 1998, p. 208). Thus, I use generalizability here

to refer to reader or user generalizability, which involves allowing the readers to assess whether or not the study applies to them or their situations (Merriam, 1998). Researchers can protect external validity by providing rich, thick descriptions; describing how typical the individual or situation is compared to similar ones; maximizing variation in the sample, and using multiple sites (Merriam, 1998, 2002).

In this study I preserved external validity through the use of rich, thick description in the final research product. Providing this type of description allows helping professionals to read the research and decide whether or not it applies to their clients. In addition to a thick description, I also utilized maximum-variation sampling. By seeking out a variety of individuals with differing experiences, I maximized the range of diversity for this study (Merriam, 1998). Regardless of strategies to preserve external validity in this grounded theory study, the resulting theory does not generalize to all gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

### *Reliability*

Reliability has to do with “whether the results of a study are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 1995, p. 56). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) also defined reliability as “a fit between what they [researchers] record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations” (p. 40). Researchers can safeguard reliability through triangulation, peer examinations, an explanation of the investigator’s position, and keeping an audit trail (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

In this study I included triangulation, peer examinations, and subjectivity statements as outlined above. Although I did not keep an audit trail to describe the



details of data collection and research decisions, I made use of memo writing. While an audit trail describes data collection, coding, and research decisions in detail, memo writing focuses on researcher's ideas about codes (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing is often used in grounded theory research to chronicle descriptions of codes and categories. Researchers "stop and analyze [their] ideas about codes in any—and every—way that occurs to [them] during the moment" (Charmaz, p. 72). As mentioned above, memos can come in the form of a diagram or a journal entry. Not only did memos help me in defining codes and categories, they also assisted me in detecting gaps in the analysis and in constantly comparing data (Charmaz).

#### Limitations of the Study

As in all studies, there were inevitable limitations regardless of my efforts to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. For example, the participants in this study are not representative of all gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with Christian backgrounds.

Shallenberger (1996) explained that:

Gay men and lesbian women are often reluctant to volunteer for studies that require them to disclose, particularly if they are not yet comfortable with their homosexuality. This reluctance means that those who do take part are more open than the average, and hence, not completely representative of the gay and lesbian population, as a whole. (p. 200)

Because of the small sample size and nonrandom sampling, the study findings are limited in generalizability. In other words, the process by which participants resolve conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs will not necessarily hold true for all gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

Although I sought a maximum-variation sample, the vast majority of participants were Caucasian individuals who identified as either gay or lesbian. A true maximum-variation sample would have included more racial diversity and additional queer identified individuals. As the study progressed, I attempted to recruit people of color and queer identified individuals. I sent out another wave of recruitment flyers, and specifically asked for participants from these groups. Unfortunately, my efforts to increase sample diversity did not succeed. Due to the personal nature of this study, it is possible that individuals relied on their gay or lesbian sexual identity rather than their political or queer identity. In fact, one participant identified solely as gay in the pre-screening, and it was only in the interview that he referred to himself as queer. Additionally, queer-identified individuals and people of color may be overextended in terms of the amount of research being done with these populations. Further, there may be some level of distrust due to misrepresentation of these groups in prior research.

Another limitation of this research is that participants were restricted to those that were willing and able to undergo deep self-reflection. In order to identify the process by which they resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs, I asked participants to examine and analyze their experiences with this conflict. Analysis of self and identity may be complex, especially when addressing issues of sexual identity and religious beliefs. Not only can these concepts be vague and illusory, but they may also bring up deep emotions for participants. Therefore, I needed to recruit individuals that were self-reflective, articulate, and emotionally able to participate in this type of research. Perhaps it was because I recruited reflective individuals that most of the participants were

well-educated. In fact, the vast majority of them are currently students at the Bachelor's-, Master's-, or Doctoral-level.

Lastly, participants had to recollect events and experiences in their lives that may have happened years ago. Although some recollections might have been clear and accurate, other memories could have been flawed. Individuals might have had difficulty illustrating past events in a precise way because of the passage of time, changes in their worldviews, or the emotional nature of the experiences. Participants' accounts may not have been identical to how others remember the same event. In the end, though, what mattered were the participants' own experiences, remembrances, and narratives.

#### Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Subjectivity is present in any research, through research questions, interview questions, personal biases, and so forth. Peshkin (1988) explained that "researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress" (p. 17). My own biases undoubtedly affected my research, and I attempt to examine those subjectivities now.

Growing up in the Deep South, I was surrounded by individuals who believed that being a homosexual was a choice and a sin. These beliefs were often tied to religious convictions and church affiliations. I also had multiple friends who are Christian, gay, and afraid to disclose their sexual orientation. When these friends acknowledged their sexual identity and "came out" to others, there were devastating consequences. It affected almost every aspect of their lives, including their family, friends, and church relationships. Furthermore, in the midst of this conflict between their sexual identity and

Christianity, my friends felt torn, ashamed, and lonely. Their religion, which had been so central to their lives and identities, was slowly crumbling before their eyes. My concern for these friends and my horror at discrimination in the name of religion grew into a desire to understand their unique situations.

These experiences have certainly affected my personal beliefs and biases relevant to this study. Regarding religion, I was raised in the Catholic Church with a Catholic mother and an Episcopal father. Although I was born and lived in the primarily Catholic state of Louisiana, we moved to Georgia when I was 10 years old. During adolescence, my religious beliefs transformed to become more like the Southern Baptist and Pentecostal beliefs of my friends in Georgia. I was very involved in church, and religion was woven into every aspect of my life. I continued to be involved in a religious organization in college, and spent a year volunteering for a Christian group after I graduated from The University of Georgia. That year was a time of personal growth in which I reflected upon and sincerely questioned my religious beliefs, something I had never done before. This questioning was due, in part, to my discontentment with the social and political beliefs promoted by Christianity, including my church's stance on homosexuality. I did not and do not believe that homosexuality is a sin. During this time I not only examined my church's stance on social issues, but I also began to question my belief in God. I sought answers through personal reflection, talking to friends and spiritual leaders, reading books, and learning about other religions for the first time. Ultimately, I emerged from this experience believing in a Higher Power without aligning myself with any one religion. In fact, I focused on concepts that are common to many religions, including peace, social justice, goodwill, and human rights. Today I consider

myself a spiritual person, but I am not religious, do not attend church, and do not affiliate with any one religion. I continue to ponder my spiritual journey, making time to learn about new ideas and ways of knowing. Most recently I started to read *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Karen Armstrong (1993).

Because I am a heterosexual, I did not have “insider” status in this research. My normative sexual identity ensures me certain privileges in society. This research sought to identify how gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. However, because I have never experienced this particular conflict, my comprehension was limited. For example, Rhoads (1997) explained that “gay identity research may be especially challenging for heterosexual researchers as crossing borders defined by sexual orientation carries with it complexities that other cultural differences do not present” (p. 16). Researchers can manage heterosexual privilege by including participants as partners in the research process (Rhoads). Therefore, I included member checks to collaborate with participants as well as to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

In addition to member checks, I utilized memo writing to promote reflexivity during the research process. By constantly reviewing the context and process of the research, I attempted to remain aware of my own biases and assumptions. This awareness helped me limit the ways in which my biases affected the study. However, as Charmaz (2006) explained, grounded theory research produces theories which are intrinsically linked to the researcher as well as the society and context in which the study takes place. Thus, an atmosphere of self-reflection combined with stating assumptions,

acknowledging subjectivities, and memo-writing provides the reader with the context in which this study took place.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. There were four research questions guiding this study:

1. How do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?
2. What personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?
3. What is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and
4. How do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

This qualitative study included in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 15 participants. Interviews lasted from 50 to 105 minutes and took place in a quiet room where I work, the participant's home, or the participant's office. Other than the first two interviews, which took place in March of 2007, I completed the interviews over a 12-week period, from December 16, 2007 until March 8, 2008. Because of time constraints, I used a professional transcription service to transcribe verbatim 13 of the audio files. After receiving the transcripts from this service, I checked the documents against the audio files to ensure accurate transcripts. All of the participants expressed interest in reading my analysis and providing feedback. I sent participant descriptions and initial

findings via e-mail and received several comments, all of which were positive. I changed a few details in the participant descriptions based on the responses and clarifications I received via e-mail.

I begin this chapter by presenting these participant descriptions. Although several individuals were not concerned with anonymity, I used pseudonyms and removed identifying information for all participants. Following the individual descriptions, I provide the findings reached through grounded theory analysis. Included in this section are data to support the core category, categories, properties, and theory. Additionally, I have provided a visual representation of the substantive theory derived through inductive analysis. Because memos are an important part of grounded theory analysis, I have included excerpts from memos I wrote during the analytic process. The chapter ends with a summary.

### The Participants

The participants in this study were 15 gay, lesbian, or queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, all of whom live in the Southeastern, Bible Belt portion of the United States. The sample is especially diverse in regard to gender, age, religious upbringing, and current faith. There are 8 males and 7 females, with ages ranging from 19 to 43. Of the 15 participants, 7 identify as gay, 6 as lesbians, 1 as queer, and 1 as both gay and queer. Participants had a wide variety of religious upbringings, including Jehovah's Witness, Church of Christ, nondenominational Church of Christ, Free Will Baptist, Southern Baptist, United Methodist, Catholic, and Lutheran. Participants' current faith associations range from Christian, Episcopal, Catholic, and Wicca to spiritual, Agnostic, Atheist, and unsure. The educational level and race of the



participants are not as varied. Most of the participants had graduated from college, and several had completed graduate school. The majority are Caucasian; two individuals are biracial and one is an Asian American and Pacific Islander. Table 1 provides demographic information about these participants, including their pseudonyms, and follows the order in which they were interviewed. Following are the individual participant descriptions, all of which were e-mailed to participants as part of the member-checking process. Participants' own words have been used on multiple occasions as part of their individual profiles. As in the table, the descriptions follow the order in which I interviewed these individuals.

### *Mark*

Mark, a white, 29-year-old, gay male, is an energetic, hardworking law student who prides himself on his critical thinking abilities. Growing up in a "fundamentalist" Jehovah's Witness family, Mark's religious identity permeated his childhood. All social contact was with members of his congregation, and Mark was told that he should not associate with or have friends who were not Jehovah's Witnesses. Mark was raised by his mother and father and has one sibling, a younger sister. All were very much involved in their church.

Mark's congregation did not talk much about sexuality, but it was clear to him that homosexuality was sinful. These beliefs were echoed by his family members. In addition, Mark grew up in a mid-sized town in Georgia, where homosexuality was not accepted by most residents. Due to his upbringing, Mark explains that he was horrified when he discovered that he was attracted to other males.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographic Information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Religious Upbringing</b>
Mark	29	Caucasian	M	Gay	Bachelor's	Jehovah's Witness
William	43	Caucasian	M	Gay	Master's	Southern Baptist
Jake	31	Caucasian	M	Gay	Associate's	Church of Christ
Allen	39	Caucasian	M	Gay	Bachelor's	Nondenominational Church of Christ
Sarah	29	Caucasian	F	Queer	Master's	Catholic
Jennifer	26	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Catholic
Logan	29	Caucasian	M	Gay, Queer	Master's	United Methodist
Allison	19	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	High School	Southern Baptist
Luke	28	Filipino American	M	Gay	Masters	Catholic
Hannah	23	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Southern Baptist
Melanie	20	Biracial	F	Lesbian	High School	Catholic
Laura	30	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Various Christian
Trey	23	Caucasian	M	Gay	High School	Catholic
Deborah	31	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Lutheran (ELCA)
Chad	36	Biracial	M	Gay	Bachelor's	Free Will Baptist

While in high school Mark began to explore the idea of being both gay and Christian. He secretly attended a gay-positive church and spoke with a representative from an ex-gay ministry. After prayer and attempts to make himself into a heterosexual failed, Mark acknowledged his homosexuality. While Mark was experiencing this conflict, his father died. Mark explained that this point in his life was very difficult, and that he was suicidal at times. Eventually, Mark came out to his mom and sister, who completely rejected him. Following the tenets of their church, Mark's family members discontinued their relationships with him in an effort to bring him back into the church; this experience of losing his family was devastating for Mark. He was eventually "disfellowshipped," or had his membership revoked, from his childhood church due to his homosexuality.

Today Mark considers himself to be a gay Christian. Although he does not have contact with his immediate family, other than an occasional phone call, he considers his current church and his friends to be his family. Mark recently experienced "Confirmation," where he renewed his faith at his Episcopal church. Although he faced hardships and rejection based on his sexuality, Mark explains that he has successfully integrated his sexual identity and religious beliefs. He views himself as a happy, complete, spiritual person who enjoys thinking critically about religion.

### *William*

The second participant, William, is a reflective and friendly individual. The oldest participant in the study, he is a white, 43-year-old, gay male with two younger sisters. Although William grew up going to Baptist churches, strict attendance was not required by his mother and father. Regarding his sexuality, William explains that he

always knew that he was not “normal,” but did not tell anyone about his attraction to other males until his early twenties. William does not remember his church specifically condemning homosexuality when he was growing up, and he said that the church was focused more on other “sins,” such as rock and pop music.

In high school William moved from a large city to a small town in Georgia, where he was immediately labeled the “school fag.” Looking back, Williams is amazed that he survived all of the bullying. William also reports that he compartmentalized his gay identity by keeping it separate from everything else about him that was “normal.”

After personally accepting his gay identity, William rejected religion and God altogether. In fact, by the time William came out to his family, he had been a self-proclaimed Atheist for a couple of years. When William came out, his parents sought reconciliation and understanding about homosexuality and Christianity. After receiving condemnation from their own church, his parents stopped attending and sought other answers. In fact, they eventually resolved this conflict for themselves after discussing it with a traveling preacher. William also visited this preacher at his parents’ request, and it was the first step in his own reconciliation. After years of searching, William found his way back to Christianity. Today he considers himself a Christian who believes in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Although he does not attend church, he describes his spirituality as a secure part of his identity. William is happy with his relationship with God, and lives what he believes or “walks the walk” everyday.

### *Jake*

The third participant, Jake, calls himself a “clairvoyant” and enjoys contemplating spirituality. He is a white, 31-year-old, gay male who grew up regularly attending the

Church of Christ until he, his mother, and his sister were kicked out due to his parents' divorce. Jake's church as well as his father's side of the family viewed homosexuality as a "ticket to hell." After the divorce, Jake's family went to several other churches, none of which condemned homosexuality as much as the Church of Christ.

Regarding his sexuality, Jake explains that he always knew that he was different, but kept his gay identity a secret during adolescence. Because of his religious upbringing, Jake felt guilty, ashamed, and angry. When he was 16 he attended a presentation called "Homosexuality in the Bible" and realized that he was not alone. Jake began to question his religious upbringing when he realized that the Bible could be interpreted in many different ways. At age 18, Jake came out to his sister, who then called and told his mother. Although Jake's mother was initially upset, she eventually accepted his sexual identity. A couple of years later he came out to his father. Jake described the episode as surprisingly uneventful, which made him somewhat angry. After years of feeling guilty, he at least wanted his dad to "make a show."

Jake continued to identify as a Christian until his early twenties. At 23 he took a college course on World Religions that expanded his view of religion and spirituality. He also read a few books and visited several churches and congregations. Today Jake is largely unsure of his religious beliefs, and does not identify with any one religion. He says that "maybe there is something else out there" and talks about feeling a loving, spiritual energy around him. Although Jake misses the community aspect of being involved in a church, he does not see himself ever joining a congregation. He lives day-to-day trying to be a good person and believes that God loves everybody. Jake says that

even though he has addressed the conflict between his religious upbringing and gay identity, he has not and may never fully resolve this schism.

*Allen*

Allen is a white, 39-year-old, gay male with an in-depth knowledge of Christianity. He grew up regularly attending an independent, non-denominational Church of Christ where his father was the minister. Allen's own faith growing up was dependent on his father; in a way, his father spoke for God. His family was always very involved in their church, a place where homosexuality was considered sinful.

Regarding his sexuality, Allen explains that he always knew he was different, but kept his gay identity a secret. This led to depression, guilt, negativity, and anger. Throughout high school and college Allen prayed and read scriptures regularly to try to take control of his sexual desires. He even went to a Christian College, which was where he had his "first real sexual experience" with another man. When he graduated from college, Allen decided to "put God on the backburner" and find out who he really was. He moved to a large city, lived as a "wild and out" gay man, and tried to blend his faith and sexuality. He was never really able to bring together his gay identity and Christianity, and found himself turning to partying and drugs for a short time.

Allen has never come out to his parents, though he is open with his two brothers. One of Allen's brothers is also gay, and he has come out to their mother. Allen explained that he has probably missed the opportunity to come out to his parents, and hopes that he will not regret this decision. He is afraid that coming out to them would only bring pain and conflict with little reward. Allen bases this fear on his mother's comment that, "If one of my sons came out I would still love them, but I couldn't have anything to do with

them.” Even though his mother still interacts with Allen’s brother, Allen still cannot bring himself to reveal his gay identity to her.

Eventually Allen felt as though he had to give up his religion or his sexual identity. He says, “It’s not me trying to justify my homosexuality with Christianity, it’s trying to justify Christianity itself;” this is something he has not been able to do. He has read comparative religion books and was especially drawn to the Dalai Lama’s belief that it is better to be a good person than a religious person. Allen no longer identifies as a Christian, but explains that maybe he will turn back to his religious roots as he gets older. Losing his faith was a “painful process” that has left him questioning who he is. Today Allen says he is a spiritual person, but his spirituality does not “point to any definite thing” or Higher Power. His hope is to find the ultimate answer when he dies. Allen considers himself Agnostic because “so many things lead to a big question mark.” Modifying his religious beliefs has been a slow and painful process.

### *Sarah*

Sarah is the only participant in the study who identifies solely as queer. She is a white, 29-year-old female who is very happy with the choices she has made in her life. She grew up regularly attending a Roman Catholic church; Sarah attended mass on Sundays, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes, and a private Catholic high school. Although her church did not address the topic of homosexuality at all, the associated school was forced to address it because several students were known to be either gay or lesbian. Sarah also remembers thinking that the Catholic Church believed that you “hate the sin and love the sinner.”

Sarah explained that she did not understand that “you’re supposed to be straight” until she was in high school. At that time she realized that gender was not a criterion for her attractions. In other words, she was attracted to men, women, and people of ambiguous gender. She did not come out in high school, and people assumed that she was straight. When Sarah saw her classmates’ reactions to a lesbian student and friend who committed suicide, she decided that she needed to keep her sexual identity private.

Sarah struggled with her religious beliefs while in high school, and became more committed to her Catholic faith in order to deal with her questions. She thought that if she kept doing the right thing by praying a full rosary every night, going to mass, and being involved in her youth group, that God would take away her attraction to women. Sarah was even a part of the pro-chastity group, True Love Waits. At one point in high school, she joined a small charismatic group for a short time.

Sarah inadvertently came out during her sophomore year in college while attending a political event. She joined some lesbian protestors on stage, and afterwards her friends and professors congratulated her for coming out. Unbelievably, Sarah reported that she has come out to her parents twice, because they apparently forgot about the first revelation after a few years. This may be due to the fact that both of her parents are laid back and that it was not a big issue for them. Sarah grew up in an environment focused on love and acceptance, and this situation was no different.

After concentrating so much on religion in high school, Sarah became angry and decided to “quit” her Catholic faith because of her sexual identity. She managed her anger through journaling and writing poetry; this reflection helped Sarah deal with her bitterness and begin the healing process. In college Sarah started to identify as Agnostic



because she did not agree with institutional religion and was unsure if there was a God. She visited a Unitarian Church that was welcoming to queer individuals, but felt it was too similar to the Catholic services of her childhood. Recently Sarah began to identify as an Atheist, believing that there is no God. She does not consider herself religious or spiritual, explaining that even spiritual beliefs have to do with a deity.

Today Sarah is married to a queer identified male who has also identified as both Agnostic and Atheist. They had their union ceremony in Vermont, a state chosen because it allows gay unions.

### *Jennifer*

Jennifer is a white, 26-year-old, lesbian female who actually enjoys challenging her faith. She grew up regularly attending a Roman Catholic church, going through parish religious education, being involved in her youth group in high school, and going to the Newman Catholic Center in college. Jennifer was even involved on the state level in the Catholic college student group. She remembers hearing a few homilies or sermons about homosexuality, and they all said that it was wrong. Jennifer's family did not talk much about homosexuality when she was growing up, only to say that it was sinful.

In college Jennifer began to realize that she is a lesbian. She was unsure what to do with her feelings of attraction for women, but knew that her identity did not mesh with what she had been taught. For a while, she ignored and hid her sexual identity while dealing with feelings of guilt and anger. When she was 20, Jennifer had her first girlfriend, someone she met at church.

When Jennifer came out to her parents, they told her she was going to hell, said that this was not the way they raised her, made her tell her entire extended family, and

sent her to talk to a priest. The priest said that Jennifer should not promote her lesbian identity, but could still attend mass. At that point, her parents had divorced and remarried, and her new step-father was a very devout and conservative Roman Catholic. Based on the pressures from her mom and step-father, Jennifer sometimes questioned her lesbian identity. However, her dad and extended family were mostly accepting.

In contrast to her parents' reactions, Jennifer's friends have accepted her sexual identity. In fact, conversations with Catholic and religious friends were largely responsible for helping her accept her lesbian identity. However, her friends were not able to challenge her in her faith as much as she wanted, and Jennifer was not fully committed to her faith for a couple of years after coming out. Recently, Jennifer has looked to nature to renew her spirituality and connection with God. She has visited a Catholic church that is welcoming to lesbian individuals and has read books about different ways of interpreting Bible verses about homosexuality. Today she is trying to deepen her Catholic faith with her girlfriend, who is also Catholic. Jennifer explains that faith is a journey and reconciling faith and sexual identity is a process.

### *Logan*

The seventh participant, Logan, is a white, 29-year-old, gay male. In addition to identifying sexually as gay, he identifies politically as queer. Logan grew up attending a United Methodist church in his small hometown in the South. He often stayed with his grandmother, who was very involved with the church and was on the church board. Having a difficult childhood, Logan leaned on his religion and church. His local church preached love and acceptance, and never really addressed homosexuality. Logan was involved in the United Methodist Church until after college. He was a youth pastor,

spoke at many Methodist churches across the South, and was involved in the district, state, and national levels of the United Methodist Church. At these different levels, it was clear to Logan that the Methodist belief about homosexuality was “hate the sin, love the sinner.”

Logan has known that he is gay all his life, but never came to terms with it until high school. At that time Logan began to read the Bible and books about homosexuality and the Bible. Following his pastor’s lead, Logan realized that the Bible is a document that could be interpreted in many different ways. He knew that God had a hand in who he is, and, considering how naturally homosexuality came to him, God must have had a hand in that too.

In high school, Logan stopped denying his gay identity, but did not overtly come out to his community. He first came out at a national conference of the United Methodist Church to a group of people involved in the Reconciling Movement. This progressive movement is part of the United Methodist Church, and it focuses on reconciling the Methodist faith with homosexuality. In fact, Logan explains that it was actually the support of this movement, of his local church, a mentor, and his friends within the Methodist community at large, that allowed him to accept himself as a gay man.

Logan eventually realized that he could not change the United Methodist Church and make the organization accept homosexuality. He left the church, but only partly because of the conflict between his religious beliefs and sexual identity. The main reason that Logan left was because he became dissatisfied with other aspects of the church. For example, the church raises money for poor people but ignores those with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). And, the church uses funds to erect “fancy”

buildings that are heated all week while their communities deal with homelessness. After leaving the church, Logan attended the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) a few times, but found that it was not for him. He began to read about Eastern religions, and felt that these, in addition to Christianity, were reflected in his idea of God. Through personal reflection, Logan continues to process his spiritual beliefs, and today does not identify as a Christian. Instead, he considers himself a spiritual being who is connected to the people, nature, and world around him.

*Allison*

Allison, the youngest participant in this study, is a white, 19-year-old, lesbian female. As a child she attended a Methodist church, and then went to a Catholic church until about seventh grade. At that time, Allison became involved in a Baptist church with her friends and “got saved.” At all of these churches, the topic of homosexuality was considered taboo and never discussed. Based on the fact that homosexuality was not mentioned in church, as well as the opinions of her “narrow-minded” social circle, Allison knew that homosexuality was wrong and that it was not a viable option for her.

Allison dated men in high school and some when she first went to college. In fact, she did not realize that being a lesbian was an option until she was in college. Through her job, Allison met gay and lesbian individuals, and realized that she was attracted to one of her new female friends. As she stepped outside of her “Christian bubble,” Allison started dating a female coworker; this led to weeks of depression and confusion. Eventually, Allison accepted her attraction to women, and although she tried to hide her sexual identity at first, she eventually came out to her mom.

In talking with various mentors and friends, Allison began to modify her Christian beliefs. She came to a new understanding of Biblical verses related to homosexuality, seeing them as outdated. However, it is still difficult for her to pray and talk to God without feeling guilty. Allison no longer calls herself a Christian because of the connotation of the term, but still has faith in God and Christ. She believes that all of the world's religions lead to the same God or Higher Power, and has become much more open minded in her religious views.

### *Luke*

Luke is a fun-loving and adventurous gay male whose sense of humor was apparent as he laughed and joked throughout the interview. He is a 28 year old who identifies as a Filipino American, which is a subgroup of the Asian American population. Both of Luke's parents are Catholic, and he grew up attending a Catholic church. Luke was very involved in the church, serving as an altar boy and attending CCD classes. He explains that homosexuality was never explicitly discussed in the church, but that it was inferred that "homosexuality was wrong." The Catholic church, in his experience, promoted the view of "love the sinner, hate the sin."

Luke "didn't really make sense of" his attraction to other males in high school, but he was not really interested in dating at that point anyway. Accepting his gay identity was a process, and it was not until graduate school, when Luke was seeing a therapist, that he acknowledged being gay. Although Luke did not consider his sexual identity and religious beliefs to be mutually exclusive, his family challenged this idea when he came out to them. In fact, his sister told him to carefully think about whether or not he should

take communion; Luke's mom told him that she can accept his gay identity, but that she is not completely comfortable with it.

Today Luke sees his faith as more than "rules and regulations" and focuses on his relationship with God. He identifies as spiritual and religious, and continues to practice the Catholic faith of his childhood. However, Luke understands that not every Catholic church or group is accepting of homosexuality. He responds to these views with a question: "Why would he [God] have made me this way if it was wrong?" Luke explains that, for him, there is not one clear resolution to the conflict between his sexual identity and Catholic faith. Rather, it is a process, and the resolution is "more of a moving target." He would eventually like to be able to come out to his church community.

### *Hannah*

An inquisitive and thoughtful individual who studied religion and psychology in college, Hannah is a white, 23-year-old, lesbian female. She grew up attending a Southern Baptist church and even had perfect attendance at Sunday School for almost 10 years. In church, Hannah would hear explicitly negative messages about homosexuality, and it would be included in lists of sins such as prostitution and drug use. Hannah's parents had similar beliefs about homosexuality, and, at one point, her father compared it to bestiality.

When she was in high school, Hannah had her first relationship with another female. Her family reacted negatively, and she was kicked out of her home a few times. Hannah describes going to a Love Won Out seminar with her mother in which she listened to "ex-gay" speakers and received information about how to refrain from homosexuality. After the conference she broke up with her girlfriend in order to focus on

God. She even went to a Christian college, hoping to attend to her faith and end any same-sex behaviors. Instead, she learned about alternative Christian views of homosexuality and began a four-year romantic relationship with another female, with whom she talked about religion frequently. Hannah went on to become a religion major, studying the history of the Bible and various interpretations of Biblical passages about homosexuality. She even discussed her new knowledge with her family, but they became defensive. And, although she identifies as a lesbian now, Hannah's family "just kind of ignores it and pretends like it's not like that."

Today Hannah's religious beliefs are more fluid. She does not "think there's just one path to God now," and is open to religions other than Christianity. Although she identifies as spiritual and religious, she's "cynical" about organized religion and church. Despite her cynicism, she would eventually like to find a church where she feels comfortable.

### *Melanie*

Melanie is a perceptive and intelligent lesbian woman, who demonstrates a quiet strength and maturity. She is a biracial, 20 year old who was raised by her mother. Although her mother's family is Catholic, her mother is not religious. Melanie did not attend church until she was about 12, at which time her maternal grandmother began taking her to a Catholic church. In the next few years, she became very involved in her church, becoming a lector who read Bible passages during mass. Melanie received a prayer book from her church that outlined the church's stance on homosexuality. It said that "it was okay if you had homosexual desires but you could never act on them; that's

where the sin was.” Conversely, Melanie’s mom explained to her that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, and, in fact, she has an uncle who is gay.

In middle school Melanie began to experience same-sex attraction. Because of her religion, she decided to ignore it, pray that it would go away, and focus on her religion. Eventually, in high school, Melanie accepted her sexual identity as a lesbian, but knew that she would have to live a celibate lifestyle to stay in accordance with the Catholic faith that was so important to her. When she came out to her family, Melanie’s mom told her that “you know I still love you and you know God still loves you,” which was a powerful message for Melanie. When she graduated from high school, Melanie decided to leave her Catholic faith because of its views on homosexuality, birth control, and other issues. As far as her father’s family goes, Melanie only visits them a couple of times a year, and has not come out to them because of their strong religious beliefs and negative views of homosexuality.

Today Melanie identifies as a Christian and attends MCC. However, she believes that being religious can be dangerous because “it can exist in such ritualism and just doing things out of habit.” Melanie is more spiritual than religious now that she has left the Catholic Church.

### *Laura*

Laura is a spirited, introspective, and easy-going female who has a strong sense of self. She is white, 30 years old, and lesbian, and she attended various Christian churches and schools growing up, including the Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Baptist, and United Methodist denominations. Laura does not remember many explicit messages about homosexuality from these churches, and explains that “heterosexuality was just



assumed.” One instance, though, stands out in her mind: A Sunday School teacher said that AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality. Laura also got messages from her parents that homosexuality “wasn’t okay.”

When Laura was in high school, the people in her youth group found out that she was in a relationship with another female. There was a big “blow up” of negative reactions, and Laura was called a “predator” and a “child molester.” Because of this experience, she did not go back to that youth group again. In college, Laura began attending Native American ceremonies with a friend. At these gatherings, she was accepted and was welcomed as a Christian and a lesbian. She was called a “two-spirit” person, which meant that she manifested both male and female traits. Laura also tried to attend an Episcopal church, and even went to some Confirmation classes. Although the church was open and accepting, Laura still felt hurt and defensive from her prior experiences with organized religion, so she stopped attending.

Today Laura considers herself a “Christian” and attends a Christian church; however, her belief system draws from many different sources: Christian mysticism, contemplative Christianity, Buddhism, Native American spirituality, Paganism, and feminism. She identifies as spiritual rather than religious. In her opinion, the “Good News” of Christianity is that “we’re all okay and loved infinitely.” Laura has finally gotten to a place in her journey where she no longer feels judged, and now believes that “God loves me just like I am.” Although she has experienced adversity, she continues to have a positive outlook on life.

*Trey*

Trey is a white, 23-year-old, soft-spoken, gay male. Out of all of the participants, he came out most recently, and has not had as much time to reflect on the issues of sexual identity and religious beliefs. He grew up attending Catholic church and Catholic Sunday School. Trey does not remember many explicit messages about homosexuality from his church. When he was young, his mom explained that the Bible rebuked homosexuality. Trey also learned from his religion that “you’re not supposed to have sex until you’re married,” so he ignored and avoided his sexual desires until high school.

When Trey was a junior in high school he “came to terms with” his gay identity, and tried to manage the conflict between being gay and Catholic. While watching a Catholic program on television, Trey heard a nun tell a homosexual man that “you need to just attend church, and pray, and just get out of that lifestyle.” This caused him to struggle further with his sexual identity, and led to depression.

Trey’s mom is becoming more understanding about his gay identity, and told him “there are a lot of priests who are gay, and they just don’t practice;” in other words, many gay Catholics live celibate lifestyles. At first, Trey thought that he could continue to practice his Catholic faith by adopting a celibate life, but then he became sexually active. He explained that he felt guilty about his sexual activity, and, in turn, compartmentalized his gay behaviors. He says that “it’s wrong in the Catholic faith, even for a straight person” to have sex outside of marriage.

Trey continues to follow his Catholic faith, though his beliefs on homosexuality have changed. He believes that God will “understand and that He really is looking at who you are for you, and not just your sexuality.” In the future, Trey would like to find a

Catholic group, such as Dignity U.S.A., that is welcoming and accepting of his gay identity. He acknowledges that he is distancing himself more and more from the Catholic Church as he grows older. Eventually, Trey would like to find a partner and have a fulfilling relationship, something that would not be accepted by the mainstream Catholic Church.

### *Deborah*

Deborah is the only participant who has converted to another religion. She is a white, 31-year-old, lesbian female who grew up attending a Lutheran (ELCA) church and was very interested in spirituality at a young age. In fact, Deborah had dreams of becoming a nun and devoting her life to finding her spiritual path. Although she does not remember specific messages about homosexuality from her church, Deborah explains that she learned from her parents that “it wasn’t okay” and that homosexuals go to hell.

Deborah had strong relationships with her female friends through high school, but did not fully recognize her lesbian identity, partly because she was never told that it was an option. She did have boyfriends and, at one point, was engaged. Deborah went to a women’s college where she began a long-term relationship with another woman. She struggled with her “spiritual quest” and felt like “all those childhood dreams had been lost.” This led to guilt and depression, and, eventually, caused Deborah to “walk away from the church.” She explains that she was able to get through this time because of her supportive community.

After leaving Christianity, Deborah went on a “spiritual quest” to try to find a place where she fit in. Through this journey, she “somehow came across Wicca” and found her home. She explains that Wicca is a nature-based religion that is not

judgmental, and that it focuses on equality and acceptance. However, Deborah struggles with telling her relatives about her faith because of the negative connotation that witchcraft has in Christianity. Moreover, she thinks that it was easier for them to deal with her being a lesbian than it will be for them to find out that she is a witch. Deborah practiced and studied this religion on her own until a couple of years ago, when she found her “spiritual home and a family” of other people that follow the same path. Deborah’s religion is part of her daily life; she teaches within her Wiccan group, is studying to be a priestess, and does “homework” to learn more about her religion and the world around her.

### *Chad*

The final participant, Chad, is a biracial, 36-year-old, gay male. Throughout the interview, Chad took time to reflect on answers to my questions, taking care to provide accurate and thoughtful responses. In addition to being introspective, Chad expresses himself through the performing arts and is currently advancing his knowledge of the arts in graduate school. He grew up attending a non-denominational church and then a Free Will Baptist (FWB) church. As a FWB member, he was involved in services, church choir, all events, youth meetings, church camp, and so forth. He heard multiple sermons about homosexuality and learned that it was “an abomination,” that homosexuals “cannot inherit the Kingdom of God,” and that gay people “will burn forever in hell.”

When Chad started experiencing same-sex attraction, he felt like his world “had been turned upside down,” and he tried to hide it in any way possible. He came out to his mom at age 18, and she reacted by crying, trying to “lay hands” on him, and praying for him. By the time Chad left for college, he was looking for something to fill the void in

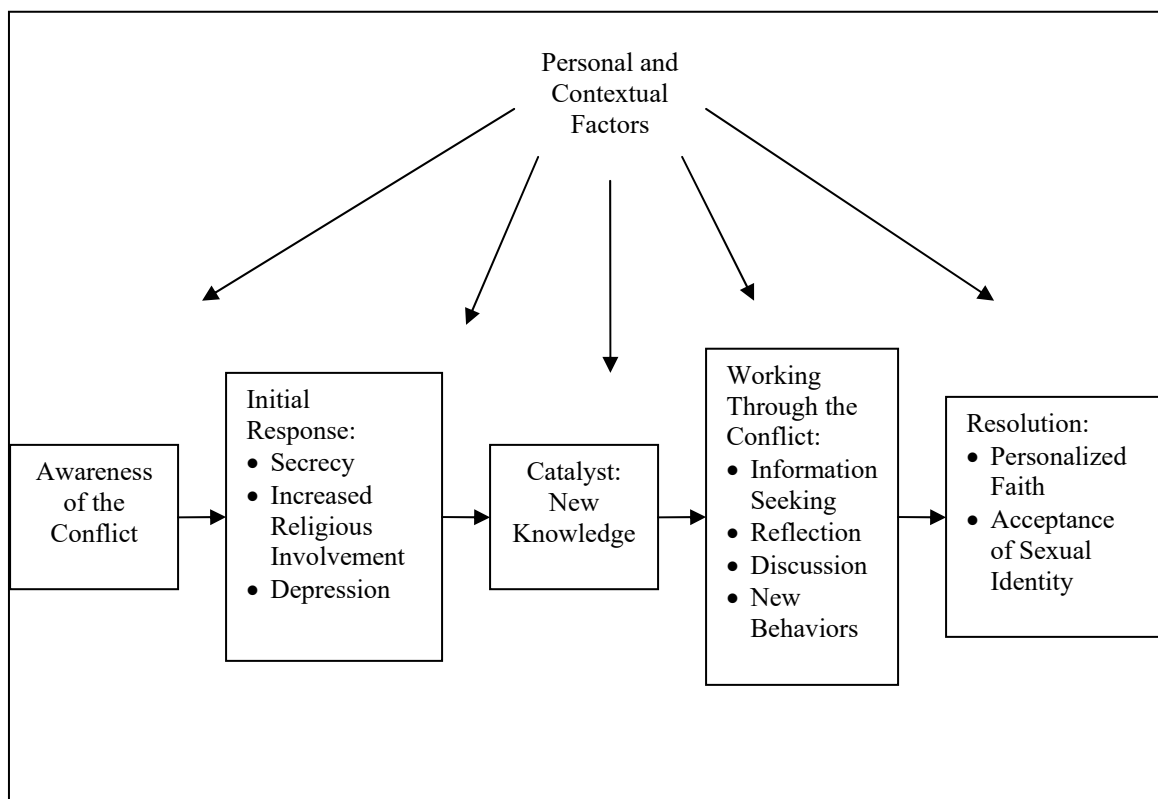
his life. He took a philosophy class and decided to be an Agnostic, which led to eventually identifying as an Atheist. Chad also turned to hard drugs and alcohol to find comfort, ultimately becoming addicted to both. After losing his job, he was homeless for a while and contracted Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). After he “hit rock bottom,” Chad joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). It was this group, along with his drug and alcohol counselors, that helped bring Chad back to religion.

When Chad started attending Christian churches again, he struggled to find one where he could truly be himself and reveal his sexual identity. He visited many churches until he found MCC, where he was baptized and now attends regularly with his boyfriend. Chad also reported that his family is much more accepting now, and in phone conversations they even ask about his partner.

#### Overview of Categories and Properties

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. Through grounded theory analysis, a model emerged that depicts this process (see Figure 1). Analysis revealed that participants defined the conflict between their sexual identity and Christian upbringing as a clash between implicit or explicit church doctrine on homosexuality and their own experiences of same-sex attraction. Awareness of this conflict led to attempts to keep their sexual desires secret while simultaneously becoming increasingly involved in religious activities. When this approach did not work, many of the participants went through periods of depression. They were only propelled to resolve the conflict by the catalyst of new knowledge—the realization that the religious doctrine of their upbringing may not be

completely true. After acquiring this new knowledge, participants began to seek additional information, reflect on it, discuss it with other individuals and mentors, and try out new behaviors. The resolution of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs included a personalized faith, which may or may not be religious in nature, and an acceptance of sexual identity. Finally, this entire process was affected by the personal factors of reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor; and the contextual factors of family, community resources, and church doctrine. These personal and contextual factors affected each aspect of the process of conflict resolution, and stood out as core categories for this study.



*Figure 1.* Model of Internal Conflict Resolution

Table 2 provides an outline of the categories and properties in this study. In the following sections, I will review each of the categories and properties outlined above, providing illustrative data in support of each.

### *Definition of the Conflict*

To participate in this study, individuals identified that they experienced a conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. All participants defined this conflict as a clash between their church doctrines regarding homosexuality and their personal experiences of same-sex attraction. For example, Mark, the law student who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, explained that he fully adopted his religious upbringing, which stated that "no loving relationship with the same sex person is possible," and he "never questioned anything until . . . coming out." In this section, I will expound upon participants' experiences and definitions of this conflict. Specifically, I will discuss implicit and explicit church messages regarding homosexuality as well as the impact of same-sex attraction.

### *Church Doctrine*

Although the participants in this study were raised in a variety of Christian denominations, all expressed a negative church doctrine in regard to homosexuality. This doctrine was articulated by church pastors, lay people, Sunday School teachers, parents, and religious school officials. However, messages about homosexuality were not always spoken or provided in explicit ways. Below I will outline first the implicit and then the explicit messages heard by participants in this study.

Table 2

*Categories and Properties*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Properties</b>
Definition of the Conflict	Church Doctrine
	Personal Experience
Initial Response to the Conflict	Secrecy
	Increased Religious Involvement
	Depression
Catalyst: New Knowledge	
Working Through the Conflict	Information Seeking
	Reflection
	Discussion
	New Behaviors
Description of the Resolution	Personalized Faith
	Acceptance of Sexual Identity
Personal Factors	Reflective Abilities
	Strength and Resiliency
	Anger
	Creativity
	Humor
Contextual Factors	Family
	Community Resources
	Church Doctrine



*Implicit.* Many participants explained that their churches never openly discussed homosexuality. In fact, Laura, the spirited participant who was involved in Native American ceremonies at one point in her life, noted that in her church “heterosexuality was just assumed.” Although same-sex behaviors were occasionally mentioned as sinful, the subject was so taboo that it was rarely discussed. For example, Jennifer, who enjoys challenging her Catholic faith, said that in her church “it was generally established that homosexuality was wrong and that’s about all you need to know . . . . It wasn’t really talked about much. It was assumed that you knew that it was wrong and don’t do it.” Similarly, Allen’s father, a nondenominational Church of Christ minister, would preach “about the evils of the world and the homosexual agenda . . . . It was definitely thrown in there as one of the sins, but it was still a taboo subject that people did not talk about.” Sarah, who attended a Catholic high school, found that people there did not talk about homosexuality either. She explained, “it sincerely was just skipped. The higher ups in the church just didn’t even want to talk about the topic.” Allison, the youngest participant who lived in a “Christian Bubble,” also said that it “wasn’t brought up. Nobody talked about it. It was in the Bible and it said don’t do it, but nobody talked about it. It was so taboo that it was one of those unmentionable things.”

Although homosexuality was not openly discussed in these churches, the negative connotation was clear. In fact, because it was such a taboo topic, some participants did not realize that being gay, lesbian, or queer was an option. For this reason, they had trouble making sense of their same-sex attractions. Luke, the fun-loving and adventurous Catholic, illustrated this point:

I think in high school I knew I had certain feelings for men, for guys, for other people in my high school, but I didn't really make sense of it. I think, especially in terms of being Catholic, the path that I saw myself on was getting married to a woman. That was what you did. There wasn't any deviation from that.

Overall, these implicit messages left participants with the same impression—homosexuality is wrong and, in fact, it is so sinful that we cannot speak about it at all.

*Explicit.* In addition to the implicit messages about homosexuality, many participants described explicit statements they heard in church. When William, the friendly and reflective 43 year old, was in high school, he “started to really pay attention to what religion was saying about it . . . . And this is what all the religious leaders were saying about it—it’s evil, it’s sinful.” Jake, who considers himself a clairvoyant, heard similar statements at his church; in fact, he heard a sermon that characterized “homosexuality as being a ticket to Hell.” Similarly, Hannah, who had perfect Sunday School attendance at her Baptist church for 10 years, said, “I’d always been taught that it was horrible and that God hates sinners and that I would fall into that category. And God turns his back on sinners. So, I didn’t think that it would be acceptable to God.” In this same manner, Chad’s FWB minister gave a sermon with the message that “you could not be gay and go to church. You cannot be a Christian. You cannot inherit the Kingdom of God and be a homosexual. You will burn forever in hell.” Laura heard comparable statements, but explained that, for her, it was “the last straw” when a Sunday School teacher said that “AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality.”

Several individuals, like Logan, who was the only participant to grow up attending a Methodist church, stated that the official church doctrine was to “hate the sin

[and] love the sinner.” Logan clarified, though, that not all churches or church members accept this official doctrine. Another doctrinal view, which was brought up by Luke, proposed that “it was okay to be gay or homosexual. You would still welcome them as part of the church, but the actual practice itself was wrong.” Melanie, the mature 20 year old who attends MCC, echoed this idea:

The way it was expressed, both in my youth group and in the book, was that it was okay if you had homosexual desires but you could never act on them. That’s where the sin was in place. So, that was the impression that I got from my religion. It was okay as long as you didn’t ever have relationships, as long as you lived a celibate life.

Trey, the participant who came out most recently, explained that, at first, he tried to uphold these views by “not practicing” or acting on his same-sex desires. Interestingly, the three participants who discussed this concept of ignoring sexual desires and living a celibate life all grew up attending Catholic churches.

In addition to church, participants heard religiously-based, anti-homosexual statements at home. For example, when Allen was growing up, he thought that his “father spoke for God. He was the final authority, so if it [homosexuality] was wrong in his eyes, then it was wrong—which made me wrong.” Trey also heard negative statements at home; he described his experience:

In Sunday School, they really didn’t talk about it, and in church they never really talked about it. So the only negative things I heard—that it’s not good if you’re a Catholic to practice homosexuality—was from my mom. She would interpret the Bible for me.

Like Trey, Deborah, who has since converted to the Wiccan religion, remembers being informed more by her family than by the church; they told her that homosexuality was “against God and you would be abolished to hell.”

*Personal Experience*

As they began to experience same-sex attraction, participants were confused and scared. Mark described his initial reaction:

I was horrified at first because it flew in the face of everything I believed a good Christian man should be and experience and feel. And, at first it didn't make sense at all and then as soon as I realized it, I wanted it to go away so badly. I prayed constantly about it. I, I didn't really seek help about because there is such a deep stigma to it, and so I was very ashamed. I would not talk about it with anyone.

In addition to the horror that Mark expressed, many participants explained that they knew from an early age that there was something different about them. William noted that, “I always knew that I was gay. I didn't know what it was called. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I always knew that I was different.” Similarly, Jake stated, “I knew I was gay off the bat when I was young.” Allen described the effect that this realization had on him:

It was overpowering, especially for such a young child, to realize at such a young age—when I was three years old—I remember being more drawn to men than to women. Even just, right around that age, realizing that it was wrong in the eyes of my church and my family.

Some participants, though, did not comprehend until later in life that they are gay, lesbian, or queer. It was in high school when Sarah realized that she was beginning to “have crushes on both men and women or people of ambiguous gender . . . . Being in a Catholic high school, it would not have been all right with anyone else.” Like Sarah, Luke did not come out until later, in graduate school. Before coming out, Luke experienced confusion about his sexual desires, and related that back to his own Catholic upbringing:

As a Catholic, I’m supposed to go find a woman, date a woman, and get married. So, I think there was that conflict in the sense that this is what I’m suppose to be doing—having a heterosexual relationship. So these feelings I’m having, well, that’s just superfluous and it’s just noise.

Similarly, Jennifer was in college when she “really started having a conflict.” She noted, “That’s really when I started realizing who I was and [thinking] this does not mesh with what I’ve been taught. This is wrong. This is a sin.” Allison was also in college the first time she experienced same-sex attraction. She told this story:

I thought she [her co-worker] was really cool and we were just friends for a long time, but then I just started feeling like I have feelings for her, and it's totally wrong. Because at the time, I was still in the mindset that being gay is not something that's appropriate.

Like Jennifer and Allison, Deborah experienced her first kiss with another female while in college. She described her thoughts at that time:

I really struggled with that this wasn't okay, and what was I going to do with myself, and what did that mean to my soul. Because I did feel, growing up, that I was on a spiritual quest. I felt like all those childhood dreams had been lost.

*Initial Response to the Conflict*

In response to the conflict between same-sex experience and church doctrine, participants became secretive and increased their religious involvement. Jake, who went to the Church of Christ, described how being more involved in church actually helped him keep his same-sex desires a secret:

I felt really safe in the youth group because who was going to be gay in a church youth group? That's where I felt safe. And it was ironic that I felt like I could hide out in this youth group and no one would pick on me or call me out or see me as being queer because I'm attending church and I'm attending this Christ-driven event. And it worked. It worked. It was like perfect stealth in the youth group and no one ever picked on me.

Becoming more involved in religious activities did not eliminate participants' same-sex desires, and, as a result, many experienced depression. In this section I will illustrate the themes of secrecy, increased religious involvement, and depression with participants' own words and stories.

*Secrecy*

As a result of negative church doctrine, participants put great effort into keeping their same-sex attractions hidden. Mark, who grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, described his reaction to being gay:

I wanted it to go away so badly. I prayed constantly about it. I didn't really seek help about it because there is such a deep stigma to it, and so I was very ashamed.

I would not talk about it with anyone.

Jake had a similar response to his same-sex desires; he said, "It was the big secret for me. I kept that secret until I was 18 years old. I just thought I was going to go to Hell until I was 18 years old." He went on to say that "it's like using a drug or something. You had to keep everything secret. That's how it felt. You just made sure to keep your drug under check so that no one knew—like you're doing something illegal." Allen, whose father was a minister, put it this way: "I felt like I was hiding in my own home; like I could not be who I really was." Experiencing same-sex attraction also affected Jennifer's family life; she explained, "I guess for a while I ignored it. I just went about my life and kept it a secret from my family for a while." Similarly, Allison discussed the difficulty she experienced in hiding her same-sex attraction from her family:

I was living at home with my parents, and so when I was at home, I just felt really burdened because I had this huge secret going on in my head. And all this stuff was happening and I didn't have them to talk to about it. I couldn't be honest and I'm a really honest person usually.

Deborah also reported uncertainty about her family: "I was scared to talk to my family. I didn't quite know if I would be thrown out or if they wouldn't approve of what I was doing."

In addition to keeping same-sex desires secret, many individuals were hiding their actions and behaviors as well. For example, Mark secretly visited MCC in order to meet other gay and lesbian individuals. He spoke of how difficult it was to keep his visits a

secret: “They [his family] sent somebody to follow me. They started to realize that I was doing something. They didn’t know what it was, but they knew something was up. But I tried to keep it a secret.” For Jake, his secret behaviors had more to do with sexuality than religion; he discussed times when he “played around” with a friend:

I just remember doing things like that all the way through until age 14. These secret things that you just did and then you said, “Oh, I’m never going to do that again” or “I’m just going to keep it secret.” It was something that was just wrong and bad that you didn’t talk about.

Chad, who now attends MCC, also hid his sexual encounters; he acknowledged that “there was a pattern of lying” about his whereabouts: “If I was going to lie about it anyway, I could basically create whatever truth that I was going to . . . I got into the pattern of lying about who I was with, what I was doing.” Several participants, like William, used the terms “fractured” and “compartmentalized” to describe their secret lives:

This part of me is gay and I’m going to keep it nice and compartmentalized over here, and this part of me is going to live like everybody else . . . So I kept it nice and completely locked away. I didn’t ever think that I could change or I could be something else, but I definitely compartmentalized it. And I was sexually active during that time. So I would go and do all the things that you read about—for lack of a better term, back alley sexual encounters. But it was almost like it was a different person. So it was definitely very, very set aside from the rest of me.

Laura also felt like she led a “double life.” Trey echoed this notion when he said that he “somehow compartmentalized my faith and my sexuality in my own mind.”



Finally, some participants explained that this pattern of keeping their sexual identity secret continued with certain groups and individuals in their lives. For example, even though he is open with his family, friends, and colleagues, Luke has decided to keep his gay identity a secret from fellow members of his Catholic church. He explained:

The church I go to here in town, they do a men's retreat every so often. I remember they were calling me on the phone and inviting me to go on the retreat. And they would have people there after church when you were leaving the building talking about it. And I don't know if I would feel comfortable doing that. And that's kind of a personal decision because what I would like to see are some more signs that the church I go to is a safe place and would be accepting of me if I were to come out. And by safe signs, I mean like I went to the Gay Pride Festival in Atlanta and there was a Catholic church that was there who got a booth. And so I think I would feel comfortable coming out there because I knew that they had shown some kind of outward sign that it would be an accepting place to go.

Allen, whose father is a Church of Christ minister, is also open with his friends, siblings, and colleagues, but has not come out to his parents. He explained why he has not done so:

I can see what would happen is that they would be upset. They would be very loving, at least my mother would be very loving, but it would be nothing but pain because all she wanted was for us to grow up and be good Christians. That's the furthest you can be from Christianity in her mind. I don't think that, and I may be

underestimating them, but I don't think it's something they could overcome or accept.

### *Increased Religious Involvement*

As participants kept their same-sex attraction secret, they increased their involvement in religious activities. Many spent time in prayer, hoping that their desires would dissipate. Mark described his prayers in this way: "I prayed that I would be changed. I prayed that I would get married. I prayed that I would meet a nice girl. I prayed that this part of me would just go away." Hannah, who went to a Love Won Out seminar with ex-gay speakers, also "prayed a lot that God would just take it [same-sex desires] away." Jake said, "I would tell God that I'd never do it again. I was very sorry. I prayed that maybe it would change and that if He wanted me to change, that He would change me." Like Mark and Jake, Sarah, who went to a Catholic high school, spent a lot of time in prayer; she "did a full rosary every night before bed for strength." After being told that "a homosexual is the worst kind of sinner," Chad "actively tried to change" himself by praying. He said of his time in prayer, "If that worked, I'd be straight today."

In addition to intense prayer, individuals attempted to study their Bibles and spend more time at church. Melanie threw herself "more into church thinking that maybe it would help me, that I would find some sorts of tools to make it go away, and I started trying to pray it away. I did so many rosaries." Allen's described his increased religious involvement, which included regular Bible study:

I thought, "If I study and I get more knowledge, that it will help me control this. It will help me be a better Christian. Then I'll actually find a faith" . . . . There was

a lot of turmoil in my life—a lot of back and forth—a lot of, “If I pray hard enough, if I study hard enough”—a lot of grabbing at other people’s faith.

Sarah, who identifies as queer, also felt like she needed to “focus on church and to be saved and to be back in relationship with God.” She described her experience:

I really had trust and faith that it would work out in the end . . . . I was like, “You know what? I’ll just keep doing the right thing and God’s going to fix it. It’s going to be all right” . . . . I, at the same time, became more and more involved. I started going to church not just on Sunday with my parents, but optional masses that we didn’t even have to go to for school. I actually became so Catholic that my parents got really freaked out. I thought, “If I really involve myself enough, I’ll learn enough that I can get myself to the point where God will take care of the rest.” So God helps those who help themselves and I’ll help myself as much as I can, and then he’ll kick in. I joined the Catholic youth group. I started really getting involved with that and taking leadership positions. I got really involved in the pro-chastity movement, which is a great way to not have to deal with sexual orientation.

In her quest to “focus on God,” Hannah went with her mom to a Love Won Out conference, which is a Christian-based workshop featuring speakers who had “become straight.” She depicted the scene that she so vividly remembers:

It was very, very conflicting because outside of the building there were lesbian and gay protesters, and I had to walk through them to go in the building. And there were all these people talking about how they were homosexual and that God saved them and now they weren’t. And so I truly believed that I could do that too

. . . . It was a transformational-type program that if you really went through it and really did everything you're supposed to do, then you could become straight. And they had several speakers who had been gay, according to them, and lived a gay lifestyle for years and they did this program and now they're straight and right with God and now their purpose in life is to help other homosexuals become straight. And they had books for sale and all kinds of things like tapes and things . . . . That particular experience was for you to see other people who had changed their life around and who could live "right" lives with God. I think that was just to be an example. That day was to be like, "You can do this."

### *Depression*

As a result of this intense, internal conflict between same-sex attraction and church doctrine, some participants experienced depression. William, who no longer calls himself a Christian but follows the teachings of Christ, started seeing a therapist because he "had a lot of depression as a result" of the conflict. Allen also became depressed; he explained that feeling like a sinner had a serious effect on him:

It affected me in depression. It affected my social skills. I really didn't have any social skills because I felt like everyone could see that I was a bad person even though I put on this outward appearance. I wasn't comfortable speaking to people or doing things; joining teams. I was kind of an outcast in school.

He went on to say that "at night, it all came crashing in. There was a lot of crying, a lot of depression." Allison, the youngest participant, talked about a similar low point in her life:

I got really depressed and my brain was kind of in turmoil about what was going on because of this girl that came into my life . . . I couldn't eat, or I couldn't not eat, and I just got the shakes. It was really crazy for a couple weeks, just trying to process everything that happened because it felt like it was so life-changing, because it was. It was just scary to think this might be who I am.

Trey also went through “a bout of depression” and ended up postponing his high school graduation for a year. For Deborah, who went to a women’s college, religion failed her when she was depressed and needed it most:

I went into a huge depression, and some of that was because of my sexuality. My mother died when I was 19, too, so it kind of coincided. But it came at a really bad time. So, when I felt like I needed the church the most, I didn't have that.

Like Deborah, Mark lost one of his parents. During the period in which he was experiencing same-sex attraction, his father died; he was, “at times, suicidal.”

### *Catalyst: New Knowledge*

Participants were able to break the cycle of increased religious involvement, secrecy, and depression when they encountered new knowledge (See Figure 2). The new information challenged church doctrine on homosexuality ingrained since childhood and, in so doing, became a turning point or catalyst for change. For example, Melanie realized, “I didn’t have to be Catholic. No one was telling me that this was the way I had to be.” Mark experienced his “turning point” when he attended an MCC service and learned about alternative interpretations of Biblical verses about homosexuality. He said, “if it hadn’t been for MCC, I would not have been able to come out.”

February 3, 2008

### New Knowledge

It seems like many participants begin to resolve this conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing when they are exposed to other ways of knowing. For example, they realize that: 1) it IS possible to be gay, lesbian, queer AND a Christian, 2) their parents / churches were NOT right about everything, 3) other religions make sense to them, 4) religion is subjective, 5) they don't HAVE to be a certain religion, and so forth.

This "new knowledge," whether it came from a mentor, friend, Sunday School teacher, book, internet article, class, or another source, propelled individuals forward in the resolution process. The new knowledge caused participants to seek even further information, and eventually led to some sort of resolution of this conflict.

*Figure 2. Memo on New Knowledge*

Mark elaborated further:

The turning point, which MCC helped me to reach, was a scripture. I would have to have the Bible exactly, I want to say [it was] Ezekiel 16: 47-50. It describes the prophet Ezekiel describing Sodom and Gomorrah. I and most other Christians . . . were raised to believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexuality. But, if you look at the scriptures, what was so important to me in that scripture is not what was there, but what was not there, because it didn't mention homosexuality at all. And instead it talked about pride. "Here's the sin of your sister Sodom, she is haughty. She has let the hand of the poor go unfilled." It talked about a litany of other vices, but it didn't talk about homosexuality. And, at that point, I still wasn't ready to completely reject everything, but that was the point where I thought, "You know what, maybe it [the

church of my childhood] was wrong about this. And if they're wrong about this, then maybe they're wrong about other things too." And so that was the clicking point for me and, like wait a second. I've been taking something for granted all of my life by literal adherence to the Bible, which I actually don't have anymore. I'm not a strict literalist now, but, even if you were a strict literalist, it doesn't really add up necessarily, so that was what allowed me to leave the Jehovah's Witness church.

William also described a "turning point" that "took time" to really sink in. For him, it involved talking with a traveling preacher who had been instrumental in helping his parents deal with his sexual identity. He vividly remembered the meeting with the evangelist:

He was the first one who ever introduced me to, uh, alternative interpretations. And he did this thing with two glasses and a pitcher of water. He said, "You know what, this is me and this is you." And the glasses were identical. And he started doing this thing with water, and I don't know if he'd done it before but it was really well done. And he said "I've been divorced. Some people think that's a sin." Pouring, pouring. "I did cheat on my first wife." And he poured again. "You're gay." And he . . . filled the cups up. And he said, "Can you tell the difference?" And I said "No." And he said, "Do you think Christ cares about the difference?" And I said "Well." He said, "Homosexuality is no better or no worse than any other sin." And he said, "So, it is a sin, but it's also who you are." And he said, "So, there's some kind of purpose to it. And none of us know that. None of us know the mind of God, etc."

Hannah had a similar “aha” moment; the “light bulb” went off at her Christian college when she “met people who were involved with the church who *did* accept people who were gay.” She was intrigued, and consequently decided to major in religion. In summary, learning that church doctrine on homosexuality was not the same across churches and hearing alternative explanations propelled Mark, William, and Hannah into seeking additional information and resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

For other participants, the realization that religious doctrine was not totally correct began with issues other than homosexuality. Jake explained that his church had a harsh stance on divorce; he said, “If my mom had not divorced my dad and we had not been kicked out of the church and then gone to [another] church where that preacher was embezzling some money,” then “I might still be in the closet today.” From these experiences Jake learned that the institution of religion is not perfect. Laura also felt a blow to her faith when a non-Christian friend committed suicide. She described her predicament like this:

This very wonderful person that I've known who loved everyone and who was so tortured took his own life. My religion is telling me that he is in hell. That's probably the first time I really started drawing lines in the sand from what people told me and what I allowed myself to believe. So that was pretty pivotal.

Melanie’s break with the church came after she “had problems with their [her church’s] stance on birth control.” Similarly, Logan, who was involved with the United Methodist Reconciling Movement, noticed “a disconnect” between the church and the real world. He emphatically explained:



I was sitting in these churches on Sunday mornings and heard, “Welcome to the house of the Lord. We’re glad you could be in His presence today,” which is a typical Methodist line . . . And I’d say, “When I was in the shower this morning, was God not around?” And I started going to all these churches all over the country and looking at these buildings and these things. And then, I’d go back to the service organizations I was involved with—they work with AIDS and HIV, they work with homelessness, with hurricane relief and those kinds of things—and I would see how far we could take so little to serve these populations. And I’d go back to church on Sunday and know that there’s a disconnect to what we’re talking about and what we’re doing.

Like Logan, Allen compared the “rest of the world” to Christianity, and, more specifically to the “Christian family bubble” of his childhood. He realized that “Christianity is good in theory, but it’s not very practical in every day life.” Allison agreed; when she “started to become friends with new people” who were not Christians, she discovered that she no longer fit in with her Christian friends. This was “the catalyst [she needed] for getting out.”

### *Working Through the Conflict*

Once individuals were driven forward by the catalyst of new knowledge, they began the process of resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing. Because new knowledge was the catalyst for this process, it is not surprising that participants reacted to new knowledge by seeking out supplementary information. Participants then reflected on the materials and discussed their thoughts with other

people. Finally, along with seeking information, reflecting, and discussing ideas with others, many individuals behaved in new ways.

### *Information Seeking*

Participants mainly looked to writings, both electronic and print, to learn more about religion and sexual identity. Allen explained that this searching was necessary because otherwise it was too hard to “see outside of” the faith in which he was raised. He said, “There’s one doctrine and that’s all you’re shown. You really have to search and find” other information. Through information seeking, participants investigated various Christian beliefs about homosexuality, other religious philosophies, and the general topic of sexuality.

There are many books about Christianity and homosexuality that address issues ranging from Biblical texts to historical context. A friend of Jennifer’s gave her a book about different ways to interpret Bible verses on homosexuality, which she found “really helpful.” In Melanie’s “own searching for different writings and books,” she found “a pamphlet that talked about different religious leaders who were in support of homosexuality.” This resource was comforting to her, and she continued to seek other books such as *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Helminiak, 2000). Like Melanie, Laura found support in a book given to her by her college youth minister. She said:

He bought me this book called *And You Were Baptized Too*, and it was a scholarly look at some of those passages. It was different interpretations [*sic*] and I was starting to understand that the Bible did not fall out of the sky, leather bound, in English, that it was a collection of writings through time that had changed and

been translated. When I really started to do a little research on that, that helped tremendously. All of a sudden, there was a lot more wiggle room.

Different Christian interpretations of homosexuality were also important to William and Jake, who both read *Conversations with God* (Walsch, 2005). William described the message he got from this series, and how crucial it was for him:

That was a significant turning point for me. That was probably the biggest piece of my reintegration, I think . . . . And it's written very conversationally—his [author's] questions, God's answers, all of those things. And, then he asked Him [God] about homosexuality in part of the conversation. He said, "We hear so much these days about how so many people hate gay people and how it's evil." And it was a very simple quote. God's response was: "I made you. I made everyone. And my love for everyone is without reservation. So, how can I love someone who is gay any less than I love someone who is straight? If I made them the same way, then I love every one. And there is no difference in my eyes." And that connected with what I had been building up to. And [after reading this] I was crying in the middle of this stupid restaurant.

When Jake read *Conversations with God*, it unexpectedly opened his mind to religions other than Christianity. He elaborated:

I read that when I was 23 and that changed my mind. Huge. Big time . . . . It's a very simple book. It changed my ideas about how God looked at everybody. Not a Christian god, but God. That's how I have dealt with it after reading that book. I'm not thinking about a Christian god, God through Christ. I'm thinking about God.

Besides reading books, participants, like Trey, “would go on websites” to find help. Mark said that at “the beginning of my intellectual curiosity, I started looking on the Internet . . . I found the Metropolitan Community Church, and I found Exodus, it’s an ex-gay ministry.” Luke also looked online and found “an organization called Dignity USA, which is basically a ministry for LGBT Catholics.” Viewing this organization’s webpage prompted him to question the rest of the Catholic Church’s stance on homosexuality. He wondered, “If you know in your heart that you haven’t done something wrong, then how can that be considered a sin?”

In addition to resources about Christianity and homosexuality, some participants sought out information about other religions. Allen “read a few comparative religion things to see what other religions” were saying. Through his search, he realized that he “was drawn to not necessarily the doctrine of Buddhism, but the philosophies.” He has respect for the Dalai Lama’s acceptance of all faiths, and the idea that “it’s better to be a good person than a religious person.” Logan also “started reading a lot of Eastern philosophy.” He said:

I started realizing that even more and more the longer I went on. And the more I started reading about these Eastern religions and so forth, which I just kind of stumbled upon mainly more than anything . . . the more I realized how much they were in tune—these religions in general and this mysticism—in tune with nature and in tune with their version of God and their version of the Deity.

When Deborah was in her early twenties, she was still searching for a connection to religion. She “read a lot” about Wicca, but considered herself “a solitaire at that point” since she was not associated with a “coven,” or a Wiccan group.

Finally, individuals searched for additional information about sexuality that had nothing to do with religion. Allison “had a lot of issues with society’s view of female versus male and how we’re supposed to dress and act based on that.” She described her response to this issue:

I read *Gender Trouble*. I read a book called *Love Ellen* by Ellen Degeneris' mother . . . I read a couple of other books, short stories and stuff. I read this book called, *Am I Blue*, just alluding to “am I gay.”

Deborah had related questions about gender, and remembered “specifically, just as a female, trying to figure out” who she is. To that end, she asked her grandmother, “Why does “woman” have “man” in it – M – A – N? Why does ‘she’ have ‘he’ in it? Why are we, as women, always defined by men?” Finally, Laura encountered the writing of Adrienne Rich in a poetry writing class. She excitingly described this exhilarating experience as follows:

I found out about her [Adrienne Rich], that she'd been married for years and years to a man and later in life she realized she was gay and she left her husband. She was with this woman, and this collection of poems was what she wrote to her female lover. I was like, "Oh, my God, you're like writing my life. Yes, I know how this feels . . . Okay, I'm not alone. I'm not the only one.”

### *Reflection*

In addition to seeking information, participants took time to reflect on what they were learning, hearing, and experiencing. Reflection was an “internal process” for William. He emphatically advised:

It certainly helps to find people who are supportive and people who have been through the struggle and understand. But ultimately, it's your answer. It doesn't matter if anybody else approves of it or not. If you can feel good in your spirit, in your heart, about where you stand in God's eyes, then that's all that matters. And it doesn't matter what anybody else has to tell you, just find your own answer.

Don't accept anybody else's answer. Find your own.

Allen also said that it is best for people to "ask the questions themselves and search them out. Because only they know the questions they have in their hearts." Similarly, Logan suggested that individuals "stop listening to so many people and listen to yourself." He went on to give his advice for someone facing a conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing: "Decide what you want because you are a valuable enough individual to have an idea." Like these participants, Trey "didn't seek out any help from anybody," and, instead, "tried to figure it out" himself. For Jennifer, this reflection was so vital that she made a place for moments of silent thought. "Instead of going to church," she would "go out on the trails on the weekends and just hike for hours and just contemplate a lot of things." Melanie also sought out time to reflect and reconnect with God. She explained, "I just kept listening to everyone else and then I thought, "Maybe God should be the one who is telling me about this [homosexuality]."

As a result of this reflection, participants challenged and questioned their religious upbringing and formed new ideas about homosexuality. Mark often spent time contemplating life, and prided himself on his ability to think critically through issues. He described his reflection:

I was mostly focused not just on what it was to be gay, but I was trying to figure out what it was to be gay and Christian. Because if I could not find some way to make the two things come together, there is no way I would have been able to come out, because it would have shattered my identity.

Luke also attributed his coming out to “doing a lot of self-reflection and then finally realizing that these feelings I have are something I wanted to actually pay more attention to and listen to.” Through reflection, Logan gained important insights as well:

We can change. We don’t have to be our parents’ religion. We don’t have to be any religion. We can be one religion for a while, then another one, because we are changing beings that learn new things every day and have life experiences that change who we are inside. And that’s okay . . . I started to realize anyway that there are other places to find that kind of support. Maybe instead of making someone want you, you go somewhere where you’re wanted.

Similarly, Chad reflected on the Christian position of “looking past the fact that you’re in a homosexual relationship.” He really “took a look at that” and decided that it was not good enough for him; he wanted acceptance, not tolerance. Although Allison “over-analyzed everything” and was “very skeptical” about religion, after reflection, she eventually “came back around to it.” She attributed this change in attitude to the need to “believe in something.” Hannah also wanted to be able to define her beliefs concretely. She “just had so many questions” and wanted to learn about “the psychology of religion and religion itself.” Like Hannah, Laura “asked the hard questions” about theology at an early age. Regardless of the issues that participants pondered, reflection proved to be an

important way in which they dealt with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

### *Discussion*

Although some participants discussed the superiority of personal reflection to talking with other people, all found that discussing new ideas and information with others was still helpful to them. Luke described the importance of these experiences: “I talked about them [my new ideas.] I did that in order to make sure what I was thinking and feeling were truly in the core of my own belief system.” Mark also emphasized the necessity of interacting with other people:

It’s extremely important to meet other people who share at least some of the experience. Because I can’t emphasize enough that the Internet website would not have been enough. Fortunately, it put me in touch with *people* that were enough. My first advice is just to meet people, and to meet them with an open mind. Because some of them will not be beneficial and some of them will not be moral, but some of them will help you understand yourself. Or sometimes, explaining yourself to them will help you understand yourself.

Interaction with other people was either formal, with therapists or support groups, or informal, with mentors and friends. Through these exchanges, discussion provided supportive and challenging environments for the participants.

*Formal networks.* Many of the participants talked with therapists about the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. William’s therapist did not have a religious background, but “she was very helpful in terms of me getting myself together and integrating” religious beliefs and sexual identity. She provided William with a



needed “space to talk about it.” Luke also saw “a formal, an actual formal psychologist or therapist” when he was in college. He again sought therapy in graduate school, and this therapist was actually the first person Luke came out to. Deborah’s therapist also helped her as she “struggled with” her religious beliefs and sexual identity. She explained how her counselor provided the support she needed when she could no longer turn to her faith:

I had just lost my mother at that time, so I didn't have that kind of [religious] support. And I didn't come out before she died, so I don't know how she would have reacted. It was a really tough time.

Laura also met with a counselor, the social worker at her high school. Although they “didn’t go a whole lot into the spiritual stuff too much, she was so accepting . . . . So that was really helpful.” Unlike Laura and William’s therapists, Chad’s drug and alcohol counselor did bring up religion and really encouraged him to “investigate” and “look back in to” his spiritual life.

In addition to therapists, participants found formal support groups where they could discuss sexual identity and religious beliefs. For example, Luke attended “some of the groups that are run by the LGBT Center here on campus. They have a men’s group . . . . That’s been a big help to be with other men who are in a similar situation.” Hannah has also enjoyed small groups, and “being able to talk to people about religion, about what they think, about what I think, and have intellectual conversations about it.” Chad, who dealt with drug and alcohol abuse for years, had a somewhat different experience. He was involved in AA, which changed his life; he became sober and reconnected with God. Because AA’s twelve steps to sobriety mention a Higher Power, Chad “started looking

for that” and found himself “sitting at an AA meeting and crying and saying, ‘This is the first time I’ve felt God in forever.’” Additionally, on advice from his AA sponsor, Chad started to pray the simple prayer “God, I am seeking you.”

*Informal networks.* Participants found informal networks where they could discuss new ideas about religion and sexual identity. Mentors, for instance, often acted as role models and provided knowledge based on experiences. Logan’s mentor is still “very involved in the Methodist Church.” Unlike Logan, his mentor has “lived in the closet for his entire life in order to be a member of the church, and that is what he feels is his calling.” Although they have chosen different paths, they still “have a lot of great discussions” and are proud and respectful of each other. Unlike Logan, Melanie and one of her mentors, who is also her pastor, have followed the same path; they both identify as Christians and lesbians. Melanie described one of their conversations that stands out in her memory:

She just told me, “Well, you have to remember to let people know that you’re a Christian first above everything else, if that’s who you are.” And so, that was very powerful to me to understand that and then to think of how to tell other people that and how to show other people that.

Hannah’s mentor was also a church leader; she had a Sunday School teacher who was “very helpful in keeping me sane.”

In addition to mentors, friends provided informal networks where participants could discuss their conflicts. Allison’s friend helped her find her way back to God:

I went out with one of my gay friends to Waffle House one night and somehow we just started talking about God and how I felt conflicted about my relationship,

or lack of relationship with Him. I felt like He couldn't love me because of my sexual identity. We just started talking about what the Bible does say about homosexuality and he just expressed that a lot of things in the Bible, like not being able to wear certain things or dance in the streets, was [*sic*] dated to that point in time [when the Bible was written.] Things have evolved and changed since then.

Like Allison and her friend, Hannah and her girlfriend talked about Christianity and homosexuality. Because they were both religion majors, they took classes together and had long discussions about Christian views of homosexuality. Similarly, Trey met a lesbian who was “still a practicing Catholic.” Meeting her made Trey “feel better” because he realized that he was “not the only one.”

*Supportive and challenging environments.* When participants discussed issues of religion and sexual identity with people from formal and informal networks, they often found supportive environments. Trey said that it “really helped” to talk to his mom’s side of the family. Additionally, he had a “friend to console with and talk with about these issues.” Laura also had a particular friend who provided a sounding board for her ideas about religion. She talked about one experience that stood out:

One night I unpacked that whole story about what happened in my youth group because I never talked about it. Because the way I had been portrayed to myself [by the church] was that I was a predator. And I laid this out for her. It was like, “Here's my deep, dark secret. Here's why church hurts so much.” She apologized. She listened to it and she was like, “I know I don't have the right to do this, but I'd like to apologize on behalf of the church because what they did

was wrong.” And I was so taken aback by that. It was so strange and it was so funny because that was so healing.

Similarly, Jennifer’s girlfriend gives her religious support. They have started doing a “daily reading” each night. She described the effect this has had on her, saying that “it’s definitely brought me closer, back to God, and it feels better coming back to something that’s been a big part of my life for a long time.”

In addition to being supported, participants were challenged by their formal and informal discussions. When Jennifer graduated from college and moved to a new city, she “didn’t really have too many people to talk with” about her religion and sexual identity. She said that her new friends “don’t really know how to deal with it, how to ask me questions, or how to challenge me.” However, Jennifer finds comfort in her discussions with her Catholic girlfriend as she explained, “We’re challenging each other about our faith.” Allen also found value in challenging his beliefs. He offered advice on how to cultivate these challenging environments:

Don’t be afraid to ask questions and don’t get the answers from just one person.

You have to see what answers other people give. Some [people] can be very convincing that this is the answer and this is the way you should believe, but other people can have a different point of view. You have to search those and find out what’s the truth for you.

Finally, Logan has enjoyed talking “with friends who totally disagree” with him. For him, “that’s challenging. That’s interesting. I want people to challenge my ideas.”

### *New Behaviors*

Besides seeking information, personally reflecting, and discussing ideas with others, participants tried out new behaviors. Mark explained that if he was “going to explore anything, it was going to be different.” For William, resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs was “a slow, steady process of trying things out, exploring different things.” Participants’ new behaviors fell into two categories: religious and sexual.

*Religious behaviors.* It was important for individuals to not only read about other religions and denominations, but also to attend various religious services. Logan advised, “Try a different church. Go somewhere else for a few weeks just to see, just to compare, just to give yourself more insight and more opportunity for different ideas.” Many participants were drawn to MCC, The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UU), and the Episcopal Church because of these denominations’ acceptance of homosexuality. Mark decided to “go to an MCC church meeting” and laughingly described the experience in this way:

It was so painfully awkward for me because I was about to meet gay people, which I’d never done before to my knowledge. And, and I was going to a religious meeting that made no sense to me and that I actually strongly opposed at the time. Because I hadn’t disavowed my Jehovah’s Witness beliefs at that time, but I was just trying to meet somebody who I had something in common with. It [the service] was at this hotel, and I was terrified. [Laughs] I was so terrified. There wasn’t really anybody my age because I was, I was like 17 . . . . They were all very, very nice to me though, but there’s nothing they could have done to

make it easier. It was weird. It freaked me out . . . I would not participate in it [the service], and I would not say “Amen” to their prayers. [Laughs] Because “Amen” means “let it be,” and I wasn’t comfortable with that.

Allen was also “amazed the first time that I heard about the MCC, the Metropolitan Community Church. I was amazed to hear that there was a gay church. I actually went to it a couple times.” Unlike Chad, who “found a home” at MCC, Allen was “turned off by it because all they did was say, ‘We’re gay and we’re okay. We’re gay and we’re okay. We’re gay and we’re okay.’” Similarly, Allen said that there are “other aspects of my life and I don’t want to be a gay person who celebrates God. I want to be a person who happens to be gay.” Logan had a comparable experience when he went to MCC and other welcoming Christian churches. He said, “they shoved being homosexual down your throat” and that was not what he “wanted to hear every morning at church.”

In addition to MCC, UU is well known for its acceptance of homosexuality. Sarah went to a UU service, but she “couldn’t deal with it because it was structured like a Catholic service. You sit down; you stand up for some of the songs.” So, even though UU was “a great match” for her at the time, she was unable to “handle the service being the same” as her religious upbringing. Chad also visited UU, but found that “it was very heady and intellectual” and was not a good fit for him.

In addition to MCC and UU, a couple of the participants went to Episcopal churches. Unlike Mark, who was recently “confirmed” at his Episcopal church, Laura only visited for a short time. She described her significant experience in these words:

One morning I woke up and I decided I wanted to go and I went and I sat at the back of the church because I didn’t know the rules of the Episcopalians. I’d never

been to an Episcopalian church. I sat in the way back and they did the call for communion and I just sat there. I didn't go down for communion. And after the service I tried to escape without talking to anybody but the priest cornered me . . . and he was like, "I just want you to know that you're invited to our table." And for some reason that was really significant to me because the Catholics have closed communion, but Episcopalians have open communion . . . and there was no way to get around the fact that I was probably gay because I put that on my outside appearance because I just didn't want to deal with anyone who wasn't going to accept me. It was kind of the litmus test. If you can get past the spiky hair, we can be friends, but after he approached me, I left. I got in the car and I just cried and cried and cried and cried.

Laura even visited "seeker classes" at the Episcopal church to learn about the denomination, but she "was still so defensive" about religion that she "couldn't go back."

In addition to welcoming Christian churches, some participants attended services of other religions. Jake explained how he felt after attending Jewish and Hindu services with friends:

I was like, "Wow! There is this big world out there" . . . As I got even older, into my mid-20s, I was like, "Well, maybe it's not just Christianity. Maybe it's Buddhism, Hinduism. I like some of these ideas." I took World Religion. I was 23 at community college. I was going to community college and I was like, "I like some of those ideas too."

Deborah also “went on a quest trying to figure out what it was that did fit” her idea of a spiritual place. She was introduced to Wicca by a friend, and stayed with it. She happily explained:

There had been a few years in there where I didn't practice any religion. I didn't go to church. I didn't want to have anything to do with it, which my family didn't like at all. Then, I somehow came across Wicca. I think it was actually through a friend that had spoken about Wicca and it being a nature-based religion and having a god and a goddess. And it really focused on equality and it was nonjudgmental. And it was a place that was accepting to [*sic*] who you are because it's about your path, and it's just a different path. So, that felt really, really good.

Laura's search led her to Native American spirituality. For her, it was what she needed spiritually at the time, and “it was a whole different kind of system” than the religion she was used to. She elaborated:

I had learned an entire new system of spirituality which was not incompatible with mine and it was really neat. And the great thing was that, within that community . . . there was a place for me as a gay person.

For many of these individuals there was, as Chad put it, “a lot of legwork . . . like years of leg work” involved in trying out different religious options.

*Sexual behaviors.* Participants not only tried out new religious behaviors, but they also explored a range of sexual behaviors. Several discussed experimentation in childhood. Jake laughed when recalled this memory:



When I spent the night at his [a childhood friend] place, we would sleep in the same bed and his dad would come in and he'd put his hands on the both of us and he'd say a prayer—a very intense prayer. Then I remember he would leave the room and we would play around with each other.

This childhood experimentation led to additional exploring in adulthood. Trey, who grew up in the Catholic Church, initially tried to maintain a celibate life, but he was unable to do so. He said: “I had sex and stuff, and I'd always feel guilty afterwards.” Although Trey has not yet found a partner, he hopes to in the future. He explained the distinction between having sex and being partnered and said that being sexually active did not fulfill his desire to “be in a relationship.” William also began exploring his sexuality by having sex. His “occasional tricks” were separate and isolated from the rest of his life. Allen, who grew up in a Church of Christ, described his first sexual experience this way:

Oddly, my first real sexual experience was at a Christian college, in the dorm of a Christian college. There was a lot of turmoil. I'm supposed to be here strengthening my faith, finding my faith, becoming a minister or whatever I was going to do with my life, but that homosexuality followed me to school.

In addition to being sexually active, having their first same-sex partners was a big step for many participants. William kept his first boyfriend a secret from everyone else in his life. He described the situation like this:

I ended up having a boyfriend, for lack of a better term . . . . And we had this relationship going on, and it lasted for several years. But it was totally clandestine. You know, everybody thought he was my best friend and nobody knew anything about it.

Jennifer also “didn’t tell anybody about” her girlfriend, whom she actually met “on a mission trip.” She explained that at first they were “just friendly,” but “then it turned into more.”

Participants went on to describe the progression of these relationships, and how they finally found partnerships that felt right. Hannah explained, “I just started hanging out with her [a friend] some and even went to church with her some. And she told me about herself and it just kind of happened. And we were together for two years.”

Allison’s first kiss also “just happened” and was an “aha” moment for her:

Eventually, my feelings for her got so intense and I was so physically attracted to her that I was like, “I’ve got to explore this because it’s driving me crazy. I don’t know where this is coming from.” So, some things happened between us and it was just kind of an “aha” moment [Laughs] you know, where . . . I thought, “That’s the best kiss I’ve ever had.”

Deborah had a similar first kiss with her girlfriend. She softly described what led up to that moment:

We actually met at the very first day at [college], and so we had a year of our friendship being very close. And it was similar to the friendships that I had growing up in that it was very close. We left for the summer and we talked quite often and sent letters. Upon going back to school our sophomore year, we were so happy to see each other. We had our giggles in our stomach, and it was awesome, just like it should be.

Finally, Sarah said that if her partner had not been so wonderful, she “might have wondered if it [the relationship] was a mistake. So that was very important.”

### *Description of Resolution*

In describing their resolutions of the conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing, participants were quick to explain that it is a process. Regardless of whether individuals identified their faith as religious or not, they have all stepped away from organized religion to embrace a more personalized faith. Additionally, participants accepted their sexual identities as gay, lesbian, or queer.

### *Personalized Faith*

In moving away from organized religion, faith became more personal for the participants. Mark eloquently explained why these changes in faith were necessary:

It's difficult to emphasize how often gay people need to realign our spiritual identities. Many of us keep them, but they have to be altered because, otherwise, there's no way that we could conceive of ourselves in a positive way . . . .

Because I think, as a Jehovah's Witness, and probably as most religions that can be described as fundamentalist, the message is just obedience. You don't question anything. There's really no place for you to make decisions. You just kind of take the authority from on high and go with it. And there's no place for individuality. There's no place for free thought. There's no place for nuances of gray. And I don't believe that anymore.

Allison "stopped going to church" because she thought that she would "be persecuted" because she had a different ideology. Trey also described "distancing" himself from his church due to his denomination's beliefs about homosexuality. For William, "organized religion and religious tradition and those kinds of things just get in the way" of true faith. Finally, Melanie said that "religiousness is dangerous" because "it can exist in such

ritualism and just doing things out of habit.” In the next two sections I will describe in further detail participants’ personalized religious and non-religious faith.

*Religious faith.* As individuals turned away from organized and institutionalized religion, their religious beliefs and behaviors became more personalized. This was true for participants who still believe in Christianity, those who attend Christian churches, and those who are spiritual but do not affiliate with any one religion.

Several participants continued to identify as Christians, but did not attend church. Their Christian faith was focused on personal beliefs rather than religious participation or organizational rules. William “reached a point” where he decided to come back to Christianity. He described his personal faith in a matter of fact way:

I believe the teachings of Christ. And Christ had zero, nothing to say about homosexuality, at least nothing that survived. So, I just threw out the Bible [Laughs] . . . . But I definitely consider myself a Christian. I hate the baggage that goes along with that [word], and I hate the assumptions that people make when they hear it. I have a different definition because when I say that “I’m a Christian,” it means I follow the teachings of Christ—not Paul’s interpretation of the teachings of Christ, and not John’s interpretations of the teachings of Christ.

Laura also stressed that she has a different definition of Christianity than most people. She explained:

Somewhere in all this, I had decided that I was a Christian but my definition of Christianity was probably different than other people's, so much so that maybe no one else would think I was Christian. And so that's okay, I was willing to be a heretic . . . . It [my religion] borders on Christian mysticism or contemplative

Christianity. I would say that it's been flavored with Buddhism. It's definitely been flavored with the Native American tradition. It's been flavored from my feminist readings . . . . Underneath it all, I have found that it has less to do with reconciling my homosexuality to my religion as it does with reconciling myself with my Creator.

Hannah admitted that her version of Christianity today is “a lot different than what it was.” Before, “it was very constricted,” and now she is “very open to other religions” rather than living by “the straight and narrow” path like she was taught. Hannah summarized her change in beliefs this way: “I don’t really like organized religion anymore. It kind of scares me because people are so willing to believe whatever they’re told.”

Like Christian participants who do not currently attend church, individuals who do participate in church services were quick to explain that their faith was more personalized. Although Mark is “a very devout Episcopalian now” and was “just confirmed,” he enjoys using his “individuality” and “intellectual independence” to think for himself. Melanie also stressed the importance of independence:

I identify as a Christian and I attend a Metropolitan Community Church . . . . I think that I’m a lot more of an independent religious person. I attend church regularly but not as often. What I used to get completely from the church—I draw that from my other Christian friends that I have Bible studies with, and just more discussion, and more of my own searching for different writings and books and things like that.

Similarly, Jennifer discussed thinking for herself and worshipping God apart from her congregation. She realized that she “has a relationship with God and it’s a pretty good thing,” and that she can choose on her own to “come back to” her church if she wants to.

Luke also described his personalized faith:

When I think about my relationship with my faith [before coming out], I think initially it was more like these are the rules that you have to follow and there’s no deviation from it at all. If you’re gay, then you don’t act on it. Whereas now, I think that’s kind of changed. My faith isn’t so much made up of these rules and there’s something else that’s more important than just these rules and regulations. There’s kind of a bigger picture that you miss if you focus too much on that, and that’s having a relationship with God and being a good person overall.

For Chad, even though he “found the church, and it’s a great place to go to worship on Sunday . . . for me, really, truly what Christianity is about is fully being the person that you are, that God made you.”

Finally, non-Christian, spiritual individuals found their own personalized faith. Jake “took a long time to finally realize that God loved” him, and it only came when he understood that God is “a lot bigger” than the box we put Him in. Logan also described a larger concept of God. He explained:

Certainly, there were more religious places where the people gathered and so forth, but [I finally] acknowledged that this identity, this Yahweh, is everywhere and so much more. It’s in us. We are parts. We’re all connected. And that was lovely to me.

Allison is also “a lot more open-minded and a lot more liberal” about her faith. Although she still believes in some of the tenets of the Christian faith, she no longer calls herself a Christian because of the “baggage” that goes along with the term. Instead, she says, “I believe in God.”

*Non-religious faith.* Some participants identify as non-religious, and these individuals also discussed having a more personalized faith. Their faith, however, was in humanity rather than in God or a Higher Power. For example, Jake believes in “karma” and tries “to be careful with other people.” Allen, an Agnostic, described losing his religious faith and replacing it with faith in people:

I couldn't give up on homosexuality. I knew that's who I was. It made me give up on Christianity . . . . It's a painful process to lose your faith . . . . Trust me. Having your faith die is not easy . . . . [For me], spirituality is that goodness that people have inside themselves that transcends all religions. It's not necessarily a part of everyday religion but it's something that's inside your self.

Sarah, who is an Atheist, dramatically conveyed a similar experience:

At the time I graduated, I was done. I was done with being in that high school. I was done with being a member of an organized religion of any sort. After that it was like, “There is no God. What are you talking about?” So challenges are supposed to be how you prove your faith or whatever. That's just shit. It just is . . . . But I'm happy like this. And other people find that religion helps them through adversity. That's great. I hope they stick with it and it keeps helping them. It didn't work for me . . . . I have a vague notion that all humanity is interconnected. I like trees, but I don't worship trees . . . . I'm happier now and I

believe in a better humanity than I ever did as a religious person. I'm more hopeful for the future than I ever was then. I push myself harder to be a good person in day-to-day life and to do a lot more service than I ever did when I believed in God. Because now I believe that if we, as humans, don't take care of each other, nobody else is going to catch our back. And when people do good things, it means more to me now than it did before because I don't chalk it up to some deity watching out for me. I say, "This is a really good person who did a really good thing." And so all of that has taken on a greater sense of meaning for me.

### *Acceptance of Sexual Identity*

In addition to personalized faith, all participants accepted their sexual identities, whether they are gay, lesbian, or queer. Trey described it as "coming to terms" with the fact that he is homosexual. Mark explained that "coming out is a continual process, and it starts with yourself." He knew that he was gay when his attempts to "pray it away" did not work. Luke agreed that the "biggest thing is accepting" himself. For Deborah, acceptance was a "huge life lesson;" she acknowledged that "this is who I am and I need to trust it because it's not going to change."

This acceptance of sexual identity came at different times for participants. Jennifer recognized about a year after her first same-sex experience that she is attracted to women. Logan, on the other hand, said, "I knew I was gay since the day I was born; I just finally came to terms with it in about tenth grade." He went on to say that "it was just natural. It was innate. I was unquestioned when it came."



It is important to note that in describing the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, participants emphasized that it is, in fact, an ongoing process. Mark commented, “I don’t think that we’re static individuals.” William put it this way: “Life is a journey . . . . So, I just feel like that’s part of what I’m here for, and I’m going to be open to the journey.” After pausing to reflect on his resolution, Luke also described life’s journey:

It’s more of a process, more of a moving target rather than [going] from having these unresolved issues to having this resolution. So it’s somewhere in between, and you’re always moving, hopefully, more towards a resolution. So I recognize that in my life there’s parts of that conflict that I’m more at peace with and there’s still other parts of it that are not as comfortable for me.

Likewise, Jennifer said that the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs “is not something that changes overnight.” Rather, “it’s a process that’ll go on forever. I think you can deal with it, but it just takes time . . . . I think faith is a challenge. It’s something that you work through your whole life.” Allen resisted saying that he had “come to a conclusion” in regard to his religion. He acknowledged, “I think that it’ll be something that I’ll struggle with for the rest of my life. I would say almost every day I think about it, about how to resolve the conflict.” Both Allen and Trey left the door open to the possibility of seeking another faith at some point in the future.

### *Personal Factors*

Analysis revealed four personal factors that helped participants manage or deal with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Personal factors affected every aspect of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious

beliefs, and included reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor. I outline each of these personal factors below.

### *Reflective Abilities*

Being reflective and thinking critically about their situations helped participants deal with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. For Mark, reflection in and of itself was a spiritual act. He noted, “I’m a very independent person. I have a lot of intellectual independence. And I feel that it’s important to God to express myself.” Logan described reflection in much the same way, and explained how helpful it was and is for him:

It’s looking inward at myself. It’s believing that I’m smart enough to have my own ideas. I’m smart enough to figure this out on my own. There’s enough spirit in me, and that spirit in me is worth enough that I can investigate that. I’m not alone here. I can educate myself. Once again, I like to read. I like to read—not just [authors] who agree with me, but people who don’t. I want them to challenge me. I have to look at my own concepts and ideas and come to terms with those and reflect on those and meditate on those. And, certainly, no one else can tell me what’s right or wrong. They can, but I don’t have to believe them. I have to figure that out for myself.

Like Logan, Allen found that it is important for him to figure things out for himself. Because Allen’s father is a minister, personal reflection allowed Allen to think for himself and find his own path apart from his father:

Something that’s helped me along that path is the observation of the world versus seeing what my father’s observation of the world is, and seeing that they’re

different, seeing the massive difference between the two. I'm slowly able to form my own opinion and allow it to be different than my father's and allow it to be okay.

As she stepped outside of her "Christian bubble," Allison also formed her own views:

"Opening my mind up to what truths are out there for me has been really good and really helpful to discover myself and my identity and how I really feel about the different parts of my life." Deborah also related reflection to the process of discovering identity:

I want to understand things. I want to know more. I think that's been a huge asset because I could have easily denied who I was. People do it all the time, and then they don't come out until later in life, or they commit suicide, or horrible other things because they don't know how to reconcile that. I think because I have that strength of wanting to know more and having to be active in whatever it is that I'm doing – so, for me, it was, "I need to find some kind of spiritual belief. I need to be active in searching for that, because obviously it's not here." That's [reflection] been huge strength. Otherwise, I wouldn't have a spiritual place right now . . . I'm very process-oriented, so I want to analyze and take things apart and understand what my feelings and emotions are, because it's not something I've always been able to do; so I know how I feel about things and my reaction to things and my views and values and morals.

Like Deborah, Melanie and Laura discussed the importance of analyzing various positions on issues related to sexual identity and religious beliefs. Melanie's personal reflection, for example, had to do with learning about and critically thinking through several different stances. She explained in a matter of fact way:

When an argument is presented in front of me, I have this need to see more than one side. I think that that definitely helped a lot, in terms of how things were presented to me in my church. I wanted to understand not only why there were all these positions against who I was, but to also understand positions. I love to learn so I think that helps with my desire to have more resources on it and understand it.

Laura also enjoys thinking critically, and studied theology when she was in high school. She explained that she reflected best by writing thoughts in her journals:

I've always been a writer and I journaled and journaled and journaled. I journaled my way through high school and part of college and I still do. When I'm ready to sort my thoughts out and make them stop spinning in my head, I will journal them and then I can see them and I can stack it up. It helps me stop feeling my way through life and it helps me write it out so I can think about it a little more clearly. So I think that was definitely something that helped . . . I was in the gifted program in middle and high school, and they really focused on helping you learn how to do critical thinking and encouraging you to think for yourself and so that was helpful.

### *Strength and Resiliency*

In addition to reflection, participants commented that strength and resiliency helped them cope with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Trey said, "I'm a person that can take a lot, and I think I'm pretty strong that way." Chad also had "a great deal of will and determination to have gotten through that and to come out of that." Towards the end of his interview, William made a related remark:

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. But the journey was worth it. I wouldn't change anything, honestly. Even the harassment and the bullying and all that crap that I got and dealt with in high school, I wouldn't change any of that either because it all came together. I do think things happen for a reason and that it all has come together in a certain way to make me who I am.

Like William, Jake was thankful that his journey made him stronger. He explained that his conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs elicited strength: "I'm stronger because I had to force myself to think differently and I'm glad I had to force myself to step outside of myself at a younger age and [tell myself] 'I am okay.' I think that's made me stronger." Logan was also forced to rely on his strength at a young age, as noted in the following remarkable account of his resiliency:

I'm an incredibly strong person. I grew up with my grandmother who raised me. She was an incredibly strong woman. Didn't always make the best decisions, as we all don't, but she was incredibly strong. Her husband died when her children were 13 and 15 and she had to raise them. She had gone right from her daddy's arms to her husband's arms . . . . I grew up very strong. Both my parents were and are functioning alcoholics and sometimes barely functioning alcoholics. I grew up very, very young, at 7-8 having to stay up late to turn the stove and oven off to make sure the house wouldn't burn down. I think that built just a very strong character. I told you I grew up being 40 already. I really did . . . . And I think that equipped me really well to deal with those things. Ever since I could remember, I'd always been called sissy and fag. I didn't know what those things meant. I was used to being teased and all that. Having gone through that, again, I

was just resilient. It didn't mean that it didn't hurt. I cried a lot. I got upset a lot. But I quickly bounced back . . . . And it made me really strong because—am I going to be strong here or I am just going to curl up in a ball and cry? Well, maybe I think too highly of myself but I'm not letting anybody do that to me. If you look at lots of stories and so forth of young people growing up homosexual, they tend to take one or the other path—very fragile or very strong-willed. You have a choice to make. You're going to let that get to you or you are going to not let anything get to you, or at least not let it show to anybody. So I think that what helped was having to grow up so young so fast because of other things beyond the homosexuality. I got my driver's license and I moved in with my grandmother full time because she was dying of cancer. My mother wouldn't do it and the other daughter, my aunt, wouldn't do it. So I moved in with her and went to school. I went to high school full time and worked a part-time job and cooked all her meals at night so they were ready for her the next day and took her to all her chemo and radiation. You just have to grow up. You have to deal with all that. And so I think that there were those outside influences that kind me forced me to grow up in those respects and just lent themselves very well to the struggles that I would have to go through.

Like Logan, Deborah's extraordinary strength also came from within:

I'm very strong-willed and I can be very fiery. It's been huge in that, for one, if I'm going to do something, I'm going to put my whole heart into it. I'm not somebody who just is a passer-by or just a witness to things. So, I tend to be a go-getter . . . . Being able to self-identify and being able to have strength in

myself to be able to say that, as a woman and as a survivor of different things, and as a lesbian, that this is okay. And to not let my family talk me down or to say that it [being a lesbian] is not okay, and to be able to say I am [a lesbian]. For me, I ended up moving to Georgia because I needed space. I needed to be an individual and explore my life on my own instead of with my family. So I think that I had strength to come 750 miles, even though I was scared. I didn't have a lot of money. I didn't know anybody. I said, "I need to start over again. I need to do this for myself." So, even though I doubt myself and I have a lot of guilt, somewhere inside of me, I've got a lot of power, too, and I took that power to try to take me to the next level.

Finally, Allen gave poignant advice on where to find strength and resiliency: "If the whole world's against you – or it feels like the whole world is against you, don't be afraid because you still have yourself."

### *Anger*

For several participants, feeling and expressing anger was an important part of their experiences. This anger was, first and foremost, directed at the church or religious establishment. William remarked, "I went through that whole angry idea of 'Well, if that's your God then I'll have nothing to do with Him' . . . I had to do that in order to be able to come out." Laura drew the same conclusion:

I was so angry at the church because my idea was that the church was supposed to be this place that loves you and accepts you and helps you grow and is this force of change in the world and is this light shining in the darkness, but it caused more misery than it cured.

Sarah, who went to a Catholic school, was angry with religious leaders and religion in general:

And when I got to college and I was able to step back, I was living in a whole different state. Everything was different, a whole different geographical state, not mental state. [Laughs] It gave me the permission to be angry and I was so angry about all of it. I was like, “Religion killed my friend, religion got my other friend kicked out of school. Religion got my third friend who’s also very close living in a garage.” Who wouldn’t be angry? . . . . A great way for me to vent anger was every Sunday I didn’t go to church. I felt like it was actually being active and angry. I didn’t think of it as just sleeping in. I was waking up knowing I wasn’t at church at that moment and that was an actual proactive expression of hate towards all the stuff that happened. I wasn’t angry at any specific individual person aside from [my friend’s] parents who said, “Don’t live in our house,” but I was really frustrated at the group for not doing anything [for her] and for the youth group leader, people who had specific responsibility . . . . I was still really angry about the whole thing, on a macro level, on a systemic level.

Although Chad feels bad about this now, he used to “walk around [his college] campus and say, ‘I can smell a Christian from a mile away.’” He explained that he was “pretty confrontational about it [and] pretty bitter about it all.”

In addition to anger at organized religion, some individuals were frustrated about their same-sex desires which, in turn, led to irritation with God. For example, Allen commented:



When I was younger, it was anger at myself for being different. Then it would become anger at other people because I was different. I was having to be angry at them because I didn't know how to justify it [same-sex attraction] in myself. As I got a little older, in high school and in college, and I saw that my father didn't speak for God, it was anger at my father, which then became anger at God.

Jennifer expressed a similar sentiment: "I definitely felt angry because I didn't understand why this was happening to me . . . I think I was angry with the situation in general. I was angry at God." After being angry for years, Jake said: "You just get pissed off. You're just tired of it. As each year goes by, you're tired of feeling so guilty and one day you just explode. One day you just say, 'Screw it.'"

### *Creativity*

Several participants talked at length about personal creativity, and about how artistic outlets provided a means for expressing emotions like anger. As an artist, Jake explained that he "had an outlet to express myself though, art. That was very nice and that was very therapeutic, because I had this outlet to express my emotions which seemed so bottled up." He went on to describe his experience as an artist:

Well, it's just expressive. So, it's combining technique with this expression. I just fell for it. I loved it. And when you don't have any friends, you draw a lot. And I became very good. I won scholarships when I graduated from high school to Savannah College of Art and Atlanta College of Art, and just wasn't sure that is what I definitely want to do [*sic*]. Anyway, my parents were very supportive. They would buy me canvasses and paints and I became happiest painting. And it's just great to produce something out of all this time and this emotion, and I

miss it to this day. I just got a set of 15 brushes and I'm thinking about starting back up again. I got them at a thrift store. It's just great to have an outlet and then to have a product of that outlet—to be like, “Wow, I did that.” That's always kind of cool.

Like Jake, Sarah found a forum where she could openly express her emotions:

I was going to be a creative writing major so a huge amount of my creative writing stuff, which now looks like journaling, but at the time I thought it was fabulous prose . . . . And that helped me to think about what I was angry about and really form it into full thoughts instead of just this storm . . . . So that was very useful to me in processing [my anger]. Also I took part in poetry readings and things. So, of course, when you're 19 and taking your second ever creative writing semester, and you perform at a poetry reading, everybody's standing up and just has horrible poems that they're reading out loud, but they really feel strongly about. So I got to just lay it all out and say this stuff in a socially acceptable way . . . . And I did theatrical poetry. So sometimes I would be standing on top of a table or screaming or rolling on my back, but I really got to communicate this upsetness [*sic*] in a socially acceptable and supportive atmosphere to people that I'd never met before. And that was really purging and useful as well.

In addition to Jake and Sarah, Chad found an outlet in theater and the performing arts. In fact, he is currently working on an important project that works to give a voice to “the people that are spiritual and liberal.”

Several participants, like Jennifer, though creativity about how to worship God. Jennifer explained: “I’m a big nature person, so I started experiencing more of God, more spirituality out in nature. So, instead of going to church, sometimes I’ll just go out on the trails on the weekends and just hike for hours.” Luke also found that it has been “very important [for him] to go outside and go somewhere really beautiful and see the sunset” and know that “this is part of creation. This is something that God made.” In the midst of condemnation from organized religion, Jennifer and Luke creatively found ways to worship God without attending church services.

### *Humor*

In addition to creativity, humor was vital to a couple individuals in dealing with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs (see Figure 3). Jennifer described her sense of humor:

I like to make people laugh, so I guess that helped me deal with things because I always shrugged it off. Like, “Oh, I’m still the same person” and try to make a joke about something. That made the transition [to identifying as a lesbian] a little easier.

Chad has always believed that “sometimes the best lessons that I’m learning are the ones that just make me smile.” He went on to say that he “was the most miserable when I was not able to call on my sense of humor.” Unlike Jennifer and Chad, Sarah was a little unsure about her sense of humor. She explained, “I want to say a sense of humor helped me . . . I think I try to act like [it did].” Sarah did, however, find some humor in the somewhat “ridiculous” fact that she had to come out to her parents twice because they forgot about it the after the first time she told them:

I told [my dad] the whole funny story [about how I had come out once before].

He's like, "I don't remember that at all, but that really does sound like something that would have happened in our house at that point, so you're probably right."

It's like, "I remember it pretty clearly" . . . . So I just think it's very funny. And dad's probably forgotten again, and they'll re-figure it out sometime down the road or they won't.

March 5, 2008

#### Humor

One finding that I did not expect was the use of humor to cope with the conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing! I was surprised that participants would be able to find humor in such painful experiences. Several individuals, though, discussed the ways in which humor helped in the face of this conflict.

Although I was initially surprised by the use of humor, as I look back on the interviews, participants *did* laugh and joke about their experiences. It seemed so natural and unforced that I did not realize it until now. Perhaps laughter was the "best medicine" for these unbelievable hardships, broken relationships, and true loss.

*Figure 3. Memo on Humor*

Related to finding humor in difficult situations, Laura discussed her generally optimistic outlook on life:

I'm also generally optimistic. There are people who tend towards depression. I tend towards anxiety, but I don't tend towards despair. So, you can't keep a spirit down that wants to get up again. So, when faced with the choices, "Okay, I can

believe that I'm bad and awful and evil and wrong” or “I can find a new way to interpret all this and do some research.” I'm definitely going to take door number two.

### *Contextual Factors*

In addition to personal factors, participants were influenced by their environments or contexts in which they experienced the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. For example, Mark explained the implications of being gay: “My family would be disappointed. They would alienate me; they would be alienated from me. I would be condemned by not only the congregation and society, but God.” In this section, I describe the importance of family, community, and church contexts for participants.

#### *Family*

Some participants are not out to their family members because, as Allen put it, “I never felt like my parents would really love me if they knew who I was.” He went on to say that his decision to stay in the closet was based on this difficult experience:

I had some conversations with my mother when I was in college and she said something about a co-worker whose son who just came out and she was saying, “If one of my sons came out I would still love them, but I couldn’t have anything to do with them.” That helped form part of my decision of whether to tell my parents or not.

Similarly, Trey said, “My dad doesn’t know” because “he's pretty anti-homosexuality and not really at all condoning of it.”

Unlike Allen and Trey, most participants have come out to their family members, some of whom expressed disapproval. Jake actually received messages about his sexual identity from his grandmother before he even came out. He clearly remembered:

When I was younger, it was like I was starting to realize that I was going to be gay. I was 13, maybe. I was watching an episode of the “Golden Girls” and my grandmother was down there . . . . And my grandma and I loved “Golden Girls.” We use to sit around and watch. And my grandma would say, “Now you see how they’re trying to make that?” And she would do this all the time. She would use examples in the media, if you were sitting there watching something in the media. So she would be like, “You see how they’re trying to make that look like it’s okay? These shows are all coming on these days trying to make it look like it’s okay. And that’s not okay and that’s not how you are.”

Like Jake, Laura learned early on how her family felt about homosexuality: “My favorite joke in middle school that I heard directly from my parents was ‘God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve’ which was really funny until I was about 14 and realized that, ‘Ew, I, kind of like my best friend.’” Mark teared up when he described deep rejection by his family after coming out to them:

I knew I was going to lose it all. I knew that they were devoted enough to the religion that if they had to choose, they would not choose me. And I was right. So, I started looking for a job. By that time I was 18 and I had graduated from high school, so at least I could be on my own . . . . I really shouldn’t say that my mother kicked me out. I say . . . I was invited to leave. Because the truth is, it was just really apparent that I had no place there. And so one day when

everybody was gone, I took the clothes that I had and I put them in my car and I didn't come back. [Crying]. Sorry . . . . It was a huge step. And it was a liberating step for me, but it nailed the coffin in my relationship with my family. And, we both, we all acknowledged that there was no turning back from that point . . . . [My mom's] faith doesn't allow her to talk with me either so every once in a while we have these bizarre conversations that never skim below the surface. And she doesn't want to know anything about who I am or what I'm doing because she doesn't believe that I can be happy. So even though I'm much happier now than between 17 and 18 . . . she continues to believe that I'm fooling myself. And my sister won't talk with me either.

Like Mark, Hannah's family reacted negatively when she finally came out: "It was a big deal for them what other people thought about them and the family name. I was ruining the family name and [being] a bad example for my sisters." Deborah's described her heartbreaking experience: "When I came out to my grandmother, the first thing she said to me was that I would be abolished to hell." Chad's mom reacted a bit differently; she cried and tried to pray for him and lay hands on him.

Several participants explained that their parents sought religious help for them after they came out. Mark's mom brought him church materials to read. Luke's said that when his mom asked him about "talking to a priest about this or going to confession or seeking some kind of religious guidance about it," he was "really kind of taken aback because I didn't feel that there was anything wrong with me." Jennifer's parents also made her "go talk to my priest." Hannah's parents took her to a religiously-based conference where she learned how to avoid homosexual tendencies.

On the other hand, some individuals found that at least some of their family members were accepting, or at least tolerant. William's parents surprised him by leaving their church after their pastor "told them that the only way that they were going to achieve my salvation was to kick me out of the family until I came to my senses." Like William, Melanie experienced acceptance from her family. Melanie's mom made her views clear early on:

My mom started talking to me about, not necessarily the church and homosexuality, but homosexuality in general when I was about 7 because I have an uncle who's gay. I asked her why he had so many high heels in his closet, which was funny. So, she started telling me there was absolutely nothing wrong with it. My grandmother always told me that there is nothing wrong with it.

In addition to sexual identity, the participants who are no longer Christians discussed whether or not their families approved of their decision to be non-religious or to convert to another religion. Deborah said that she is "much more out and forthcoming" with her sexual identity than with her spirituality, which she has only disclosed to her grandmother and her dad. She thoughtfully said:

I think family is really important and it's really hard to tie that in with your spirituality and sexuality. I'm sure I've said that, but I think that's really tough and I think a lot of people really struggle with that piece. I think there's a lot of sadness for people who don't find a place to call home. For me, I think I was very lucky.

She went on to talk about how her father's religious conversion affected her:



My father came out as a Buddhist – not came out, but he kind of discovered Buddhism late in my teens and really sees himself as a Buddhist at this point, which opened the door for me spiritually. It was something that I was able to look around and say that this is okay. My family struggles with him being Buddhist and they worry about his soul, which is expected. But he let me know that it's okay and that I'm on this path for myself and that I'll figure it out.

When William came out to his family, his “sister who was much more conservative and religious couldn’t believe it.” She immediately inquired about his religion, and when she learned that he identified as Atheist at that time, “that was more devastating for her, and probably to my mom, than me being gay.” On the other hand, when William came back to his Christian faith, his family was pleased. Chad had a similar experience of identifying as an Atheist, and then returning to the church. He described his family’s positive reaction:

I told them that I was baptized at our church, and I told them it was a Metropolitan Community Church for gays and lesbians primarily, and straight allies. They were happy, and they respect it. They were respectful and that makes me so happy to hear that. I’m so glad.

Some participants explained that their gay, lesbian, and queer communities became their families. Mark talked emotionally about the difficult loss of his immediate family:

I guess the main thing is about the word “family” and the meaning of it. Because even as a 29-year-old gay man who has been ostracized from his family for over a year, the word “family” is very important to me and the concept of family is very

important to me. But it means something a lot different now because the people who were my biological family chose not to honor the concept.

Deborah also explained how the gay community is like her adopted family: “We have huge kinship of selected family, so to speak, and this is what we really rely on.”

Finally, three of the participants, Luke, Melanie, and Chad, discussed the importance of cultural influences in their lives. This idea of culture is related to the contexts of family and community. Luke, who is a Filipino American, has parents who are both from the Philippines. When he was young, Luke learned the Filipino word for gay, *bakla*. He said, “I remember learning the context that or the connotation that [word] had—someone who was *bakla* is a man who is very effeminate.” He went on to say that his cultural background sent him the message that “to be gay was to be very effeminate,” and that now he “wants to sort of rebel against that image” and portray himself as “very masculine.” In addition to Luke, Melanie talked about cultural issues stemming from her family background. Melanie is bi-racial; her mother is Caucasian and her father is African American. She explained that her father’s family is “much more rooted in gender roles” and are “very blunt” about their religious beliefs and views. Because of these issues, Melanie is not out to this side of her family. Finally, Chad acknowledged the affect of culture on his life. His mom, who is Korean, once told him that “we don’t have gay people” in Korea. Chad believes that his mom uses her culture as an excuse to “pull some of the heat off of herself for not making any strides in understanding” his sexual identity.

### *Community Resources*

Community climate and community resources definitely affect people who are gay, lesbian, and queer. Sarah thought her story “would be really different” if she had grown up in the Southeast instead of the Northeast, where people “expect diversity, whether they want it or not.” Although Jake did grow up in the Southeast, he lived in a progressive and large city. When he was 16, a local bookstore brought in an academic author who had written a book on homosexuality and the Bible. Jake said that seeing this man speak “did a lot” for him. It helped him to “be okay” with himself and know that he was “not a freak,” and that “there are other people out there” who are also gay.

As opposed to Sarah and Jake’s experiences, Allison’s community led her to believe that being gay is an option. She put it this way:

The people that I had been around my whole life are very conservative, politically and socially, very narrow-minded about what's acceptable in terms of race and class . . . . I never ever got the idea from anyone in my family or any of my friends that being gay was an option, or that it in any way was a good thing.

There was no positive light ever shone on that at all.

Similarly, Hannah ignored her same-sex desires initially because she “knew it wasn’t something that would be accepted” in her social circles.

Many of the participants, like William, lived in more than one town due to a family or individual move. William’s family moved when he was in tenth grade to “the sticks.” He talked about his difficult move from an urban area to the country:

I mean, our high school had like 500 people in it. And I went from this huge urban school to this tiny little redneck school in the middle of nowhere. And I

immediately was labeled the school fag. And this was the first time I started hearing the words and the verbal [harassment]. And I did nothing to earn it. I think honestly it was more because I was a city boy in the middle of all these redneck country boys.

He went on to say that it was “only by comparison” that he realized that “it was probably a little more tolerant where I lived” before. Melanie also switched high-schools. Her last school “was a bit more open, and that’s why I came out when I was in that high school.”

Allen and Hannah both experienced their first same-sex experiences once they moved to Christian colleges. With this experience, Allen felt “a lot of turmoil.” He knew that he was “supposed to be here strengthening my faith, finding my faith, becoming a minister or whatever I was going to do with my life, but that homosexuality followed me to school.” Hannah also opted to attend Christian college so that she could focus on her faith. Instead, a light bulb went off when she “met people who were involved with the church who did accept people who were gay.”

Several participants discussed support networks that they found or formed while they were in college. For example, Laura sought out like-minded people at her university and “formed an underground support group.” Even though the school would not give them “club status,” they “put up flyers” to advertise meetings. Laura’s group included people “from different faith traditions” and it provided “peer support.” Deborah also discussed the importance of the gay and lesbian community at her college:

I was very thankful to be in an environment where I had people that had gone through it before, others that haven't yet, but there were people that were there for me. Most of them were my age. We did have a couple of professors and they did

the whole “safe space” thing, where they weren't gay, or might be, but they were there if you needed support. And then PFLAG actually held their meetings on our campus, which was really nice.

Jennifer “grew up in a fairly small town,” and when she went to college, she “learned about a lot of issues in the world that I really hadn’t been exposed to. That’s what started really causing me to challenge my faith and challenge what I believed in as a person.”

When Luke was in school, his roommate was gay and came out to him. For Luke, meeting other gay men in college was a “very big influence” for him because he realized that being gay “was just another part of identity.” Laura’s college community was also very positive, so much so that she “never came back.” She “resolved the dissonance by staying away” from her hometown.

For several participants, a move to a new city was symbolic of starting their new lives as gay, lesbian, or queer individuals. Allen described his thoughts during his drive to the large city where he moved after college:

After college, when I moved to [the city], I was like, “I’m tired of lying. I’ve got this comfortable distance between me and my family. Nobody knows me in [the city]. I can be anything that I want to be. Let’s just be me.”

Allen’s move affected his outlook on life. He was able to “see the massive difference between” his “observation of the world” and his “father’s observation of the world.”

Sarah’s move was also a way for her to start over. She realized that sinking herself “into religion to try and find the answer” to the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs “wasn’t working.” So, she “decided to try being Agnostic for a while and not go to church.” Sarah explained, “When I got to college and I was able to step back, I was

living in a whole different state. Everything was different, a whole different geographical state.” Jennifer’s move opened up her world. She met gay people who “go to church,” have families, and have “committed relationships.”

Finally, several individuals reported that they missed the religious and spiritual communities of their childhoods. For example, Laura was writing in her journal one day when she realized that she “missed having the spiritual community.” Trey longs for a religious community as well, and said that he wants “to try to find a gay Catholic group.” Like Laura and Trey, Jake stated: “I miss a community of people there [so] if something happens you can call on these people.”

### *Church Doctrine*

Finally, church doctrine proved to be an important context for participants. As described in the literature review, Christian doctrine regarding homosexuality can fall along a spectrum from accepting and welcoming to disapproving and condemning. Because participants in this study identified that they experienced a conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing, most grew up in churches that were not totally accepting of homosexuality. In Mark’s church, for example, members “believe that if you are a Jehovah’s Witness and you choose to leave the organization, the only way to bring you back is to shun you.” Mark knew that if his family and friends followed this tenet, they would not “have a dialogue with anybody who leaves the church.” Thus, coming out meant losing his family and friends permanently. Luke’s church is not totally accepting either. Although he is out to his family, friends, and colleagues, Luke said that he “probably would not come out to anyone from the church community. Yeah,

something I struggle with is to go to church and . . . know that I still have to kind of hide this part of me.”

Trey acknowledged that church doctrine affected his sexual identity and sexual activity. Even after he “came to terms” with his homosexuality, he was “still attending church and hearing what they say on the Catholic network and what priests say.” Trey got the message that he should not “practice” or act on his same-sex desires. He explained further:

I thought I was always going to go with the Catholic faith, and say that I’m gay, but just not practice. Then I did practice, and I had sex, and I’d always feel guilty afterwards. I kind of still always do. I know that what I was doing just wasn’t really fulfilling because I would really like a relationship. But basically it’s really wrong for anybody, according to the Catholic religion, even a straight person unless it’s in marriage. That kind of makes it a little bit easier, I guess. My mom [has] been through three divorces, and so, for a lot of people, it’s hard to go down the right road with the Catholic Church.

In other words, Trey’s religious upbringing influenced him to try to live a celibate life when he first came out.

Jennifer and Logan were actually supported by their churches. When Jennifer’s parents sent her to a priest, “he was a little more liberal, working for peace and justice . . . . He was really supportive.” The priest told Jennifer that if she identified as a lesbian there would be “some ramifications within the church . . . . But he really just encouraged me to think it through and to offer himself as a sounding board if I needed to talk further about it.” Logan’s emphasized that his local church helped him as he came out:

I've always said and I will continue to say that my church, my religious beliefs, those that I surrounded myself with and were religious and a part of my Christian background were the ones who allowed me to be homosexual and allowed me to be queer or gay. They certainly opened that door for me. Because I grew up in such a loving congregation, it never crossed my mind that God didn't love me or my church didn't love me.

In fact, Logan first came out at a religious conference. He told his incredible story in these words:

It happened to be in that setting and I told a roomful of people. It's like a big conference kind of thing with the college-aged folks. Just on happenstance, it was my first time being involved in a national level conference or anything and they had a breakout session about homosexuality in the church. And, in the Methodist Church, there's a movement called "The Reconciling Movement" which tries to reconcile what you're talking about, homosexuality with the Methodist religion. So they're very, what I think, is proactive and progressive in terms of that and how to term it.

### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. In order to understand the process by which participants resolved this conflict, I first needed to know how they defined the conflict. Grounded theory analysis revealed that individuals understood this conflict as being between church doctrine about homosexuality and their experiences of same-sex



attraction. Participants noted that they learned about church doctrine explicitly or implicitly at church or at home through their parents. Regardless of where they learned the doctrine, individuals understood that homosexuality was wrong. Naturally, they became upset when they began to experience same-sex attraction.

As an initial response to this conflict, participants tried desperately to keep their same-sex desires and behaviors secret. In some cases, they felt like they were living “doubles lives.” In addition to being secretive about their same-sex attractions, participants increased their religious involvement. Because most people would not suspect that a particularly religious individual would be gay, lesbian, or queer, participating in religious activities helped individuals maintain secrecy. Additionally, they thought that focusing on religion and turning to God might diminish their same-sex desires. Increased religious involvement included participating in activities such as prayer, Bible study, and church attendance. Finally, the initial response to this conflict included periods of depression for most participants.

They continued to be secretive, involved in religious activities, and depressed until there was a catalyst propelling them to resolve the conflict. This catalyst came in the form of new knowledge. Some participants were exposed to other Christian beliefs about homosexuality that were in opposition to the doctrine of their childhoods. In addition to alternative ideas about homosexuality, there were other issues that made participants question their religious upbringing. When they compared church doctrine to their experiences of the world, many realized that their religious beliefs were not always correct.

After individuals experienced the catalyst of new knowledge, they began working through the conflict by information seeking, reflection, discussion, and new behaviors. It is not surprising that a catalyst of new knowledge would drive individuals to seek out further information. They looked to books and the Internet to find information about various Christian beliefs about homosexuality, other religions, and sexuality in general. After finding out this information, participants spent time in personal reflection in order to process their additional knowledge. Additionally, they talked with other people about homosexuality and religion. Discussion transpired both in formal networks, with therapists and groups, and through informal networks, that is, with friends and mentors. Further, discussion was either supportive or challenging. Finally, individuals tried out new religious and sexual behaviors. Religious behaviors included visiting Christian churches that were accepting of homosexuality and attending non-Christian ceremonies, and new sexual behaviors were related to forming partnerships.

Working through the conflict through information seeking, reflection, discussion, and new behaviors led participants to resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Resolution consisted of a more personalized faith, acceptance of sexual identity, and the possibility of future growth. Regardless of whether they identify as religious or not, participants discussed a more personalized faith. They viewed the institutionalized church negatively, and moved toward a more individualized faith. Personalized religious faith included those who identified as Christians but did not attend church services, those who were affiliated with Christian churches, and individuals who identify as spiritual. Personalized faith that was not religious focused on the good of humanity. In addition to personalized faith, all participants expressed an acceptance of

being gay, lesbian, or queer. Although some have not come out to everyone in their lives, they have all accepted their sexual identities. Finally, participants emphasized that they would continue to grow and change over the course of their lifetimes. This future growth includes issues such as sexual identity, religion, and spirituality.

This entire process of resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs was influenced by personal and contextual factors. Participants described personal factors that helped them deal with this conflict, including reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor. Reflective abilities allowed individuals to think critically though information regarding homosexuality and Christianity. Additionally, strength and resiliency were important as they dealt with resistance from others. For some participants, expressing anger at organized religion, God, and their situations helped them work through their emotions. Similarly, creative outlets, such as art and poetry, provided means of expression. Finally, humor enabled several individuals to get through this difficult conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

In addition to these personal factors, participants revealed that contextual factors including family, community resources, and church doctrine affected the process of resolving this conflict. For individuals whose families were accepting, it was somewhat easier to resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Additionally, those who lived in communities with resources for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals had less difficulty in the resolution process. Some participants even took opportunities to move to such communities so that they could, in effect, start over their lives as openly gay, lesbian, and queer people. Finally, because church doctrine can fall along a

spectrum of condemning homosexuality to accepting homosexuality, participants' religious upbringing came into play in the resolution process.

In summary, this grounded theory study resulted in a substantive theory of the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. The theory purports that this process includes an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, steps of working through the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict. The entire process of conflict resolution was affected by the core categories of personal and contextual factors. Participants who were able to rely on their personal factors of reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor were able to move through the process of resolving conflict easier than those who did not have these factors. Additionally, those who had more positive environments or contexts, including family, community resources, and church doctrine, had less trouble resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

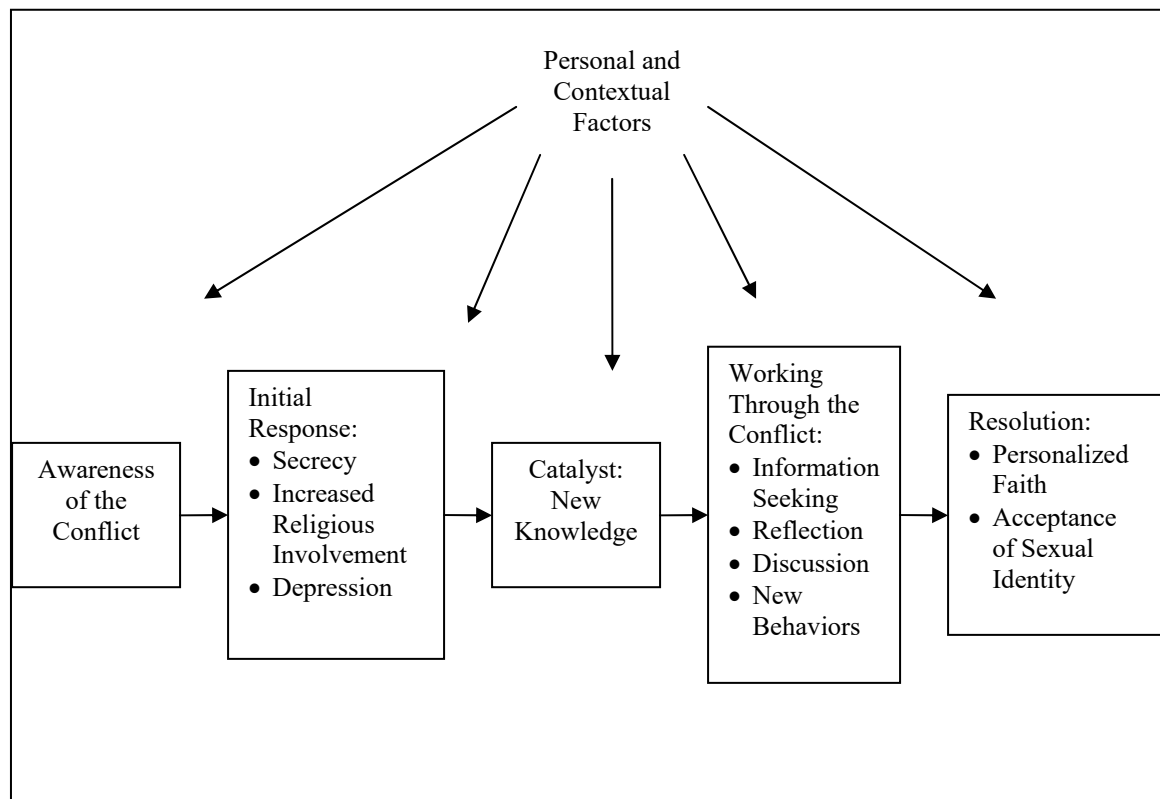
#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. There were four research questions guiding this study: (a) how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs? (b) what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict? (c) what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and (d) how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

This qualitative study consisted of in-depth interviews with 15 gay, lesbian, and queer individuals who live in the Bible Belt region of the United States. Although the interviews took place over the course of a year, 13 of the 15 occurred during a 12-week period. Interviews were transcribed verbatim either by me or by a professional transcription service. Grounded theory coding revealed a substantive theory of internal conflict resolution and core categories which affect each aspect of this process. In this chapter I will provide an outline of the findings, the conclusions and a discussion based on the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a brief summary.

### Summary of the Findings

This grounded theory study resulted in a substantive theory of the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* Model of Internal Conflict Resolution

This theory of internal conflict resolution purports that the process includes an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, steps of working through the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict. The entire process of conflict resolution was affected by two core categories: personal and contextual factors. Personal factors included reflective abilities, strength

and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor; and contextual factors were family, community resources, and church doctrine.

### Conclusions and Discussion

There were three conclusions based on the findings of this study: (a) resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution; (b) personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs; and (c) faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. I will provide details about each conclusion below, all the while weaving in the findings of the study (see Table 2 in Chapter IV).

#### *Resolving the Conflict Between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs Is a Five-Stage Process of Internal Conflict Resolution*

The first conclusion of this study is that resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution. The research on gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing includes information on their spiritual and religious beliefs, the influence of gay-positive Christian churches, and the process of identity integration. Notably absent is the identification of the *process* by which these individuals resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. This grounded theory study contributes to the literature first and foremost by providing a substantive theory of the process of internal conflict resolution. This research has multidisciplinary implications in that it adds to the literature on faith

development, sexual identity development, transformational learning, and conflict resolution.

As mentioned in Chapter II, I intended to use a theoretical framework based on the conflict resolution literature. However, I unexpectedly found that the conflict resolution literature focused on conflict between individuals, groups, and countries rather than internal, personal conflict. This study, then, is a noteworthy contribution to the conflict resolution literature in that it provides a theory of the process of internal conflict resolution. Although this internal process is distinct from interpersonal conflict, there are some aspects of internal conflict resolution that are similar to existing theories. For example, this internal process included information seeking, reflection, discussion, new behaviors, and resolution. Additionally, the process was influenced by creativity and anger. My hope is that researchers and scholars will build upon this study by offering theories of internal conflict resolution that focus on other types of internal conflict.

In this section I will outline the five stages of internal conflict resolution, which are: an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling individuals forward, steps of working through the conflict, and the resolution of the conflict.

#### *Awareness of the Conflict*

Participants defined the conflict as a clash between their church doctrines about homosexuality and their personal experiences of same-sex attraction. This is not surprising, considering Christianity's historical condemnation of same-sex relations (Williams, 1999). In fact, there is a preponderance of research demonstrating a positive relationship between fundamentalist Christian beliefs and homophobia (Bassett, Kirnan,



Hill, & Schultz, 2005; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001; Marsiglio, 1993; Miller, 1996; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000). Messages of homophobia and heterosexism, which were common in participants' childhood churches, contradicted the same-sex attraction that they were experiencing. In fact, church doctrine, in many instances, hindered the acknowledgement of same-sex attraction. Hannah, for one, assumed she was heterosexual until she experienced strong same-sex attraction:

And I didn't really even know what that [homosexuality] was because it was never talked about. I didn't even realize that that was an option, I guess, because I had never seen or known anybody else like that. So I didn't really have an example, so I didn't really know what I was feeling . . . . But then in high school I met someone and that's when it kind of came to be, I guess.

Like Hannah, Mark described the assumption of heterosexuality. For him, relying on his church doctrine actually prolonged his acceptance or recognition of same-sex desires:

But it [church doctrine] kind of allowed me to continue, though, because I just assumed that I was heterosexual. And I didn't really think about what it meant that only male images aroused me. The first time that I realized that it was sexual I was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and I realized it was sexual because I had a crush. And I'd probably had crushes before, but this was the first time I had a crush and I recognized it for what it was.

The experiences of both Hannah and Mark correspond to what Cass (1979), in her theory of gay and lesbian identity development, described as the first stage of development: identity confusion. During this stage, individuals experience dissonance between

assumed heterosexuality and same-sex desires (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). However, for participants in this study, identity confusion was complicated by the addition of negative church doctrine. In fact, “when such anti-gay language and sentiment is encountered by gays and lesbians with a strong religious faith and a strong positive feeling towards their sexual orientation, they enter a situation where identity conflict can occur” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, pp. 333-334). Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker (2001) also reported that “when an adolescent or adult begins to feel an attraction toward someone of the same sex, a conflict may be created between alternative identities—their spiritual/religious identity and their sexual orientation and identity” (p. 438). Living with this sort of cognitive dissonance is difficult, and experiencing the conflict between sexual identity and religious upbringing will motivate individuals to “resolve the felt tension between being a conservative Christian and having homosexual feelings” (Thumma, 1991, p. 335). In other words, becoming aware or cognizant of the conflict is the first step in resolving the tension between these two identities.

It is important to note here that participants made the distinction between sexual desires or attractions and sexual behaviors. For example, several participants who grew up practicing the Catholic faith, such as Luke, upheld the doctrine that “it was okay to be gay or homosexual . . . but the actual practice [of homosexual behaviors] itself was wrong.” So, one can experience same-sex desires but choose not to act on these desires, instead living a celibate life. This distinction, that sexual desires have to do with a drive or attraction to certain people whereas sexual behaviors refer to sexual contact of some kind, is reflected in the literature (Bailey, 1995; Johnson & Kivel, 2006; Nussbaum, 1999; Parker, 2007).

### *Initial Response to the Conflict*

Conflict can be internal, interpersonal, and international or between countries. “Some of the most frustrating conflicts are those that people fight within their own heads, as they struggle with the dilemmas and temptations they encounter” (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006, p. 294). These internal conflicts produce a range of emotions, from anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, and humiliation to hope, confidence, and satisfaction (Deutsch et al.; Sato, 2005). According to Wood (2007),

When managed constructively, conflict provides opportunities for us to grow as individuals and to strengthen our relationships. We deepen insight into our ideas and feelings when we express them and get responses from others. Conflict also allows us to consider points of view different from our own. Based on what we learn, we may change our views. (p. 249)

Participants in this study experienced conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, which provided an opportunity for them to undergo what Mezirow (1995) called a transformational learning experience. According to Mezirow, transformation begins when individuals go through a disorienting dilemma or “an acute/internal/external personal crisis” (Taylor, 1998, p. 41). Participants had such a crisis when they were faced with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Individuals react to conflict in a number of ways. In Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves’ (1998) study of meaning-making in HIV positive adults, individuals experienced an initial reaction period which consisted of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. Participants in this study also had initial reactions to conflict: secrecy, increased religious involvement, and depression.

The literature identifies several approaches that individuals use to negotiate the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, including compartmentalization, choosing religion, integrating homosexuality and religion, and choosing homosexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). These four strategies are evident in the various stages of conflict resolution in this study.

The first two initial strategies, secrecy and increased religious involvement, correspond with Buchanan et al.'s and Rodriguez and Ouellette's categories of choosing religion and compartmentalization. One of the ways that participants in this study kept their same-sex behaviors and attractions a secret was through compartmentalization. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) explained that "gays and lesbians can use this strategy by keeping their religion out of the homosexual parts of their lives, and keeping their homosexuality out of their religious lives" (p. 334). Several participants in this study, such as William, actually mentioned the term "compartmentalization" in describing their initial reaction to the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs:

This part of me is gay and I'm going to keep it nice and compartmentalized over here, and this part of me is going to live like everybody else . . . . So I kept it nice and completely locked away. I didn't ever think that I could change or I could be something else, but I definitely compartmentalized it. And I was sexually active during that time. So I would go and do all the things that you read about—for lack of a better term, back alley sexual encounters. But it was almost like it was a different person. So it was definitely very, very set aside from the rest of me.

Compartmentalization was not a long-term solution for individuals; rather, it was a way for them to secretly fulfill their sexual desires. And, as Rodriguez and Ouellette pointed

out, this approach only works if the two identities, religious and sexual, are completely isolated and separated. In the end, participants were unable to maintain what one participant, Laura, called a “double life.”

In addition to secrecy and compartmentalization, participants also initially chose religion in order to manage the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), choosing religion or rejecting homosexuality is evidenced by either sexual abstinence or conversion therapy. Conversion or reorientation therapy is “typically provided by nonlicensed counselors within ex-gay ministries and licensed professionals in private or public mental health settings” (Morrow & Beckstead, 2004, p. 643). This therapy is based on the belief that same-sex attraction is unnatural and can be altered; it incorporates prayer, reading the Bible, drugs, and even electroshock therapy and testicular implants (Barret & Logan, 2002; Morrow & Beckstead). The first strategy, sexual abstinence, was clearly used by participants in this study. Luke, Melanie, and Trey all of whom grew up Catholic, learned in their churches that they could choose religion by focusing on God and living a celibate life. Hannah, on the other hand, participated in an activity that was similar to conversion therapy. She attended a seminar called Love Won Out that promoted heterosexuality and incorporated “ex-gay” speakers. Although this seminar was not actually conversion therapy, it was similar in that it focused on altering sexual orientation.

Besides abstinence and conversion therapy, individuals in this study focused on their religious beliefs by becoming more involved in church. For example, Allen, whose father is a minister, said that he tried to emulate his parents by “seeing the way that they

live their lives and just trying to live that way—understanding that we’re all sinners and fall short of the glory of God—through prayer and reading the Scriptures.” Similarly, in Shallenberger’s (1996) study, individuals found “God and religious institutions to be safe places—refuges of sorts—in a world in which they increasingly felt ‘different’” (p. 203).

Although all of the participants in this study eventually acknowledged their homosexuality and identified as gay, lesbian, or queer, there are many people in the world who continue to live in the closet in order to be involved in their churches. These individuals, in a sense, continue to choose religion for the rest of their lives and ignore or suppress their same-sex desires. Logan noted that his mentor made this choice:

I have a wonderful mentor who’s very involved in the Methodist church in my home state . . . . He is a man who has lived in the closet his entire life to be a member of the church. And that’s what he feels is his calling. We have a lot of great discussions . . . . I’m proud of him for resolving it [the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs] in another way. For him—his sexual orientation and having a life partner of the same sex—was more important to give up so that he could make a difference in everyday lives of people through the Methodist church.

There is a dearth of literature regarding individuals who choose to live in the closet in order to stay involved in their Christian churches. These people may be hesitant to participate in research on homosexuality, since doing so might inadvertently identify their sexual orientation (Shallenberger, 1996). One way that future researchers might reach this population is through online, anonymous studies.

When secrecy and increased religious involvement did not eliminate same-sex desires, participants became depressed. Conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs complicates issues like homophobia and heterosexism already faced by people who are not heterosexual. In fact, studies show that depression is common among gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing (Almazan, 2007; Morrow & Messinger, 2006; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996; Siker, 2007; Wolkomir, 2001; Yip, 1998). Of the participants in Thumma's (1991) study of gay Evangelicals, "many expressed anxiety, despair, and a feeling that they had come to 'the end of the rope'" (p. 339). In Nurius' (1983) investigation of the intersection of sexual orientation and the mental health issues of depression, self-esteem, marital discord, and sexual discord, she found that "sexual orientation differences maintained significance only for depression" (p. 119). Rosenberg, Rosenberg, Huygen, and Klein (2005) explained that "LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered] people often show a higher incidence of certain psychiatric disorders, suicidality, and comorbidity," (p. 73) including depression. It is not surprising, then, that individuals in this study went through depressive episodes. Allison, like other participants, became "really confused" and "really anxious" after she had her first same-sex experience. She described this difficult period in her life:

I just got really depressed and my brain was kind of in turmoil about what was going on because of this girl that came into my life. Yeah, she's gay, but does that mean I am? I've always dated guys. Maybe this is just a fluke and it's a one-time kind of thing. I didn't know what to do with it. So I just got really depressed.

*Catalyst: New Knowledge*

Participants were propelled into working through the conflict when they experienced the catalyst of new knowledge which challenged church doctrine regarding homosexuality. Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves (1998) also found that individuals went through a catalytic experience after the period of initial reaction to conflict. Just as the experience of same-sex attraction was a disorienting dilemma for participants in this study, the catalyst of new knowledge acted as a similar crisis. In other words, both the experience of same-sex attraction and the catalyst of new knowledge were disorienting dilemmas for participants. Baumgartner (2001) proposed that a disorienting dilemma may actually appear as a process or series of experiences instead of a single incident, which was the case in this study. Through the catalyst of new knowledge, individuals realized that the religious doctrines of their childhoods were not always congruent with their experiences of the world. Such a realization could be considered a disorienting dilemma that causes individuals to question their meaning perspectives.

Mezirow and Associates (2000) explained that meaning perspectives or frames of reference are assumptions about the world that are resistant to change. These assumptions can be based on religious doctrine acquired in childhood, including messages regarding homosexuality. Taylor (1998) explained that it is only when we are presented with “a radically different and incongruent experience [that] cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective” (p. 7) that we consider transforming our perspectives. In this study, the catalyst of new knowledge provided individuals with fundamentally different ideas that challenged their frames of references. Mark, for one, was introduced to alternative explanations of the Biblical account of Sodom and



Gomorrah. He explained that “if you look at the scriptures, what was so important to me in that scripture is not what was there, but what was not there, because it didn’t mention homosexuality at all.” Mark thoughtfully described how he began to question his church:

And, at that point, I still wasn’t ready to completely reject everything, but that was the point where I thought, you know what, maybe they’re [childhood church] wrong about this. And if they’re wrong about this, then maybe they’re wrong about other things too.

Mark and the other participants who experienced the catalyst of new knowledge are not alone. Good News, an organization serving gay Evangelicals, helps its members manage conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. The organization “understands its first task to be one of convincing potential members that it is permissible to alter their religious beliefs” (Thumma, 1991, p. 339) so that individuals accept “the challenge to question doctrines and a literal interpretation of scripture” (Thumma, p. 340).

### *Working Through the Conflict*

Once participants were armed with new knowledge, they began working through the conflict by seeking information, reflecting on this information, discussing it, and trying out new sexual and religious behaviors. These strategies are very similar to Mezirow’s (1995) final three phases in transformational learning: critical reflection, discourse, and action (see Table 3). Of the vast literature utilizing transformational learning theory, only three studies, which were presented in Chapter II, have linked this theory with religion or sexual identity development (Donnelly, 2001; King & Biro, 2006; Mercer, 2006). This study contributes to the understanding of transformative experiences

because it is the first study using this theory as a framework for understanding the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. As they were transformed, participants in this study changed their ways of thinking about the world and embraced new beliefs about homosexuality, their own sexual identities, their churches, the concept of God or a Higher Power, and the institution of organized religion.

Table 3

*Mezirow's Transformative Learning Phases and Stages of Conflict Resolution in This Study*

<b>Mezirow's Phases of Transformative Learning</b>	<b>Stages of Conflict Resolution in This Study</b>	<b>Properties of the Stages</b>
Disorienting dilemma	Awareness of the conflict	
	Catalyst: New knowledge	
Critical reflection	Working through the conflict	Information seeking Reflection
Discourse	Working through the conflict	Discussion
Action	Working through the conflict	New behaviors

In Mezirow's critical reflection, individuals assess prior assumptions and beliefs that they created in childhood. As a result of this reflection, they make new meanings by combining prior beliefs with new ideas learned through experience. This phase of transformational learning is evident in this study's stages of information seeking and reflection. In these stages, participants sought out and reflected on information related to sexual identity and religion. Hannah, for example, had her "first experience with . . . different views, other than Southern Baptist" when she went to college. When she heard these "different views" on homosexuality, a "light bulb" went off in her head and she decided to major in religion so that she could learn more. In his research with gay and lesbian individuals, Shallenberger (1996) also found that participants "found themselves at a point at which they could no longer accept the [religious] beliefs that were given to them, and took a pro-active role in discovering and defining a spirituality that fits" (p. 207). This process of discovery included seeking out and reflecting on new information.

In addition to information seeking and reflection, participants discussed their ideas with other people. Shallenberger (1996) explained that "while each individual must come to some resolution of his or her own spiritual struggle, it is typically not done alone" (p. 208). In the discourse phase of Mezirow's transformational learning theory, individuals dialogue with other people so that they can test their new ideas. One participant, Trey, expressed that he felt relief after talking with a lesbian who was also Catholic. He explained that "she didn't really find any other religion that really fulfilled her religious interests, so it made me feel better, like I'm not the only one." Several participants found that speaking with a mentor or someone who had experienced conflict between sexual identity and religion was helpful.

Finally, participants in this study tried out new behaviors which were either religious or sexual. Religious behaviors included visiting Christian churches that were accepting of homosexuality and attending non-Christian ceremonies, and new sexual behaviors were related to forming same-sex partnerships. These final activities in working through the conflict relate to Mezirow's (1995) last stage of transformational learning, action. According to transformational learning theory, individuals have not truly transformed their worldviews or frames of reference unless they modify their actions. This idea rang true in this study; all of the participants changed their religious beliefs in some way, as evidenced by their actions. Deborah, for example, left the Christian faith and is now involved in the Wiccan religion. On Sundays, instead of going to church, she now attends Wiccan classes, and "as part of those classes on Sundays, it's part of my responsibility to teach people who are brand new." Another participant, William, believes that if "you're open to a relationship with God" then "it doesn't require . . . a church." He no longer attends church, and instead has a personal relationship with God.

In addition to changing religious behaviors, individuals modified their sexual behaviors by forming same-sex partnerships. Chad, for example, who is in a committed relationship, believes that his partner is a "blessing from God." Forming same-sex partnerships and searching for other gay, lesbian, and queer individuals can be a marker of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. In fact, Cass' (1984) theory of gay and lesbian identity development includes a stage, identity tolerance, in which individuals seek out other gays and lesbians to meet their social, emotional, and sexual needs.

### *Description of Resolution*

Participants' resolution of the conflict included a personalized faith, which was either religious or non-religious, and an acceptance of sexual identity. Personalized faith was an important finding in this study as individuals expressed distrust of institutional religion. Skepticism of the Christian establishment is common for those who are disillusioned with the church, especially gay, lesbian, and queer individuals. Yip (1998, 2003) found, in two separate studies, that gay and lesbian Christians in Great Britain were highly critical of the institutionalized church.

The description of resolution as having a personalized faith and accepting sexual identity are related to the findings in several studies (Buchanan et al., 2001; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Mahaffy found that individuals either left the church or modified religious beliefs in order to deal with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Similarly, Buchanan et al., and Rodriguez and Ouellette, identified four potential outcomes of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs: compartmentalization, choosing religion, integrating homosexuality and religion, and choosing homosexuality. The first two outcomes were discussed in the previous section on the initial response to the conflict (see Table 3). The last two, integrating homosexuality and religion and choosing homosexuality, correspond with personalized faith and an acceptance of sexual identity.

In integrating homosexuality and religion, participants in this study accepted their gay, lesbian, or queer identity and continued their religious beliefs through a personalized religious faith. For example, Melanie, a lesbian, attends a Metropolitan Community

Church (MCC) and is satisfied with her church and sexual identity. She explained that at her church, same-sex couples can even “receive communion together.”

Several of the participants who identify as both Christian and gay, lesbian, or queer reinforced the idea of Webster (1998) that “it is easier to ‘come out’ as a lesbian in a Christian context than it is to ‘come out’ as a Christian in a lesbian context” (p. 30). William put it this way: “It is funny, well, not funny I guess, but sad in a way, how much resistance you run into. Because that belief is so predominant within the gay community that you can’t be gay and be Christian.” In Shallenberger’s (1996) research, one participant made a similar statement, saying that “it is harder for me to come out as Christian to my gay friends than to come out as gay to my family and straight people” (p. 209).

Finally, some individuals utilized Buchanan et al. (2000) and Rodriguez and Ouellette’s (2001) fourth strategy of choosing homosexuality. Several participants in this study accepted their sexual identity, but rejected their religious upbringing. For these individuals, personalized faith was not religious in nature, and was, instead, described as faith in humanity. Sarah, who grew up attending a Catholic school, has rejected Christianity and now identifies as non-religious. When I asked Sarah if she identifies as spiritual or religious, she said:

I just go with neither. Because when people say they’re spiritual, they usually mean that they have a relationship with a deity or deities that they adhere to in their own way, and I don’t. I have a vague notion that all humanity is interconnected.

Several studies discuss this strategy of choosing homosexuality and rejecting religion. In Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams' (1994) research, 69 % of the gay male participants chose this path and no longer practiced or believed in their religious upbringing. Similarly, Shallenberger (1996), in his research about the spiritual journeys of gay and lesbian individuals, found that "virtually every one of the participants pulled away from the churches or synagogues of their childhood" (p. 203). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) outlined this process of leaving religion:

Rejecting Christian beliefs is accomplished by becoming an atheist or by becoming involved in a non-Christian religion . . . . Rejection of one's Christian beliefs can also be a very subtle experience: people no longer attend any type of worship service, they no longer pray or make any references to the presence of God and/or Christ. They simply allow their religion to slip quietly out of their lives. (p. 334)

This slow course of moving away from religion was thoughtfully expressed by Logan:

I was still considering myself a Christian, and, up until several years ago, I would still say I was a Christian. Then I realized I was saying it because I'd said it for so long . . . . I said, "I'm a Christian." He [his partner] was like, "You always say that." And I thought that's right. I do. Why? Am I? I started looking at my beliefs, which you could not align to any kind of religion. But it's certainly not directly aligned with the Christian belief system.

Although there are different ways to resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, all of the participants in this study came to accept their gay, lesbian, or queer identities and profess either a religious or nonreligious, personalized faith.

*Personal and Contextual Factors Affect Every Aspect of the Process*

The second conclusion for this study, personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, reinforced the centrality of personal and contextual factors in this grounded theory study. This is not surprising, as individuals are often affected by their own abilities as well as the environments in which they live (Chuang, Liao, & Tai, 2005; Vermunt, 2005). Social workers tend to view situations in a holistic way, and have long recognized the importance of personal and contextual factors. In fact, the ecological systems theory, a foundational theory in the social work profession, combines the ecological perspective and general systems theory (Rothery, 2001). Rothery explained how this theory emerged:

Social work has wrestled with the need for ways of thinking about clients' situations that included a respect for individuals' and families' capacities for effective coping, but also recognized the critical importance of environment—the physical and social contexts that support, constrain, and shape our efforts to live gratifying lives. (pp. 68-69)

In the next two sections I will outline the personal and contextual factors that emerged in this study, and discuss them in relation to the relevant literature.

*Personal Factors*

Personal factors influenced every aspect of the process by which individuals resolved the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Analysis revealed personal factors of reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor.



It is not surprising that participants relied on the first factor, reflective abilities, to deal with this conflict, as reflection was a critical phase of working through the conflict. Additionally, reflection is often emphasized in theories of development, including Mezirow's transformational learning theory and Fowler's stages of faith. In Fowler's second stage of mythical-literal faith, for example, faith "is more logically and reality oriented than the faith of Stage One, due to the increasing cognitive abilities of the child" (Green & Hoffman, 1989, p. 246-247). Further, the fourth stage of individuated-reflective faith, has a "heavy emphasis upon the development of a rational and self-conscious 'world view'" (Green & Hoffman, p. 247). In this study, reflective abilities helped participants sort through all of the available information regarding sexual identity and religious beliefs. For instance, Allison described a period in her life when she "over-analyzing everything" and was "very skeptical." Critical analysis and reflection, in effect, assisted individuals at every stage of the process of conflict resolution.

The second personal factor that was important for participants was their strength and resiliency. Although strength and resiliency are actually two separate concepts, they are intertwined and were not distinguished by participants in this study. Therefore, I included them together as one personal factor affecting the process of internal conflict resolution. I will, however, provide distinct definitions of each of these concepts from the literature.

According to Laursen (2003), "strengths are personal qualities, traits, and virtues . . . that often are forged by trauma and loss" (p. 12). The second concept, resiliency, was defined by Miller (2003):

Resilient behavior is more than whether an individual has pathological symptoms or disorders of some sort after experiencing a major negative life event. But individuals who do not show such symptoms or disorders-despite the fact that clinically and statistically we would expect them to (due to the nature of a given stressor)-illustrate resilient behavior. Whether a particular therapist is working with individuals who have experienced a particularly severe life trauma or not, the therapist must help to show his or her clients how they have been able to achieve successes and triumphs in their lives (especially under adverse conditions). Psychologists and laypersons alike would be well advised to heed the words of the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “That which does not destroy me only makes me stronger.”

Miller went on to say that, although the concept of resiliency is often associated with children, it is also common in adults. In fact, Bonanno (2005) found that resilience, rather than trauma symptoms, “is typically the most common response following exposure to a potentially traumatic event” (p. 136). This study was no different; participants relied on strength and resiliency to cope with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Anger was another personal factor that aided participants as they coped with this conflict; they expressed anger at their churches, organized religion, and the situation itself. In Yip’s (1998) study of gay Christians’ perceptions of the Christian community, individuals were also overwhelmingly angry and disappointed with their churches. Further, in his 2003 study of the religious beliefs of non-heterosexual Christians in Great Britain, Yip found that participants were critical of the institutional Christian church. In

addition to anger at churches and organized religion, individuals may focus their emotions on their personal situations. For example, in Cass' (1984) theory of gay and lesbian sexual identity development, people deal with homophobia and heterosexism through anger. This anger is evident in the identity pride stage, and includes confronting non-homosexuals.

In general, anger, which is common in conflict resolution, is a way for individuals to work through the clash between sexual identity and religious beliefs. According to the conflict resolution literature, anger is not always destructive, but can also provide a path to personal growth (Deutsch et al., 2006). By staying in tune with and expressing one's emotions in a healthy way, an individual can use anger as motivation to make positive personal changes and to advocate for social justice in society at large. In other words, anger serves the purpose of empowering, energizing, and mobilizing individuals.

A fourth personal factor that participants relied on was their creative abilities. The idea that creative responses arise out of conflict is widespread in the conflict resolution literature (Deutsch et al., 2006). Further, helping professionals have long recognized the importance of creative outlets in handling stress. Leavitt (2002) maintained that "creative expression also relieves stress . . . [and] can reduce pain and bolster the immune system" (p. 53). Art therapy is a kind of creative outlet, and, according to Stephenson (2006), it fosters "exploration and emotional growth through creative expression" (p. 24). Art, along with theater and writing, provided an outlet for participants to creatively express their emotions. Laura, for example, has "always been a writer." She illustrated the importance of her writing: "I journaled and journaled and journaled. I journaled my way through high school and part of college."

Although the last personal factor, humor, was a surprise to me, the concept is not new in medical, psychological, and nursing literature. Indeed, laughter is associated with health benefits, such as an increase in endorphins and a decrease in stress-related hormones (Facente, 2006; Winter, 2006). There is even a group, The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, which is committed to understanding the relationship between humor and health (Wojciechowski, 2007). Although it may seem unorthodox, there is considerable evidence in the literature that humor helps individuals cope with medical problems, stress, grief, sadness, and identity conflicts. According to Moran and Hughes (2006), “the beneficial effects of humour [*sic*] occur even in circumstances that are extreme or seem hopeless . . . . The effect of this laughter seems to be self-affirming and often provides a form of control in uncontrollable situations” (p. 504). Jennifer’s sense of humor helped her manage this type of situation. She explained: “I like to make people laugh, so I guess that helped me deal with things because I always shrugged it off.”

### *Contextual Factors*

Analysis revealed that, as with personal factors, the contextual factors of family, community resources, and church doctrine affected the entire process of conflict resolution. These factors are similar to what Benson (2004), in his discussion of adolescent spiritual and religious development, identified as important contexts: family, schools, peers, community and congregations. It is important to note here that I did not have a specific focus on gender in this study, but future research may reveal gender differences as a contextual factor affecting the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Family is the first contextual factor to consider for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. When individuals grow up in religious or even anti-homosexual households, coming out can bring up problems for family members as well as for the individuals themselves (Lease & Shulman, 2003; Saltzburg, 2004). Participants in this study experienced varied reactions from family members, ranging from acceptance to condemnation. Mark, who grew up practicing the Jehovah's Witness faith, has had little contact with his mother and sister since coming out. Sarah's parents, on the other hand, were fairly accepting of her sexual identity.

Some participants, like Allen and Trey, have not come out to their entire immediate families for fear of rejection or disapproval. According to Miller and Boon's (2000) research with gay men, disclosing sexual identity to mothers is linked to the existing level of trust in the relationship. In other words, if a certain level of relational trust does not exist, it is less likely that a gay male will come out to his mother. Because parental support and approval can be so important during identity development, those who have not yet come out or those who experienced rejection after disclosing their sexual orientation have more difficulty resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

The second contextual factor in this study was community resources. Participants discussed the various communities they lived in, and explained that they were able to manage and cope with the conflict better when they were surrounded by supportive communities. Shallenberger (1996) explained the importance of community for the gay and lesbian participants in his study:

As they progressed through their coming out, it appears to have been crucial that these gay men and lesbians find community, with one or more others who share some aspects of their spiritual journey. That goal has led many to look for a group of like-minded individuals. (p. 208)

Some of the participants in Shallenberger's study, as in this study, found community connections through "12-step programs or groups studying Wicca" (p. 208). In addition to Shallenberger, D'Augelli (2006) examined community resources for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, and he also created a community support network in a rural university town. When resources do not already exist, some may be forced, as D'Augelli was, to undergo "a reflective analysis of one's vulnerabilities" (p. 210) in order to overcome "personal barriers to involvement with change" (p. 210). Laura, a participant in this study, experienced a similar situation when she helped form an underground support group. She intensely described her emotional reaction to the situation: "They wouldn't give us club status. We were terrified. We'd put up flyers and they'd get ripped down."

The third contextual factor, church doctrine, also played an important role for participants in this study. As discussed in Chapter II, there are several different Christian views on homosexuality, ranging from accepting to condemning. Because the individuals who were a part of this study all experienced conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, their childhood churches mostly fell on the condemning side of the spectrum. During the time that participants were resolving this conflict, most attended or at least visited more accepting Christian churches, such as MCC, Unitarian Universalist churches, and Episcopal churches. These congregations were helpful to them in their efforts to manage this conflict. Chad, who still attends MCC, "knew after visiting the

first Sunday that that was the place for me, and of course I joined as a member within weeks.” Mark, who now attends an Episcopal church, also visited MCC, and said that:

If it hadn’t been for MCC I would not have been able to come out. And I don’t actually usually attend MCC churches anymore. I mean I very strongly self identify as Episcopalian now. But I’m always going to be grateful to MCC for the ministries that they do provide because I wouldn’t have been able to understand myself if it hadn’t been for them.

The experiences of participants like Mark and Chad are supported by the literature. For example, Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) found that individuals who “experience affirmation from their faith groups have increased psychological health through greater spirituality and decreased homonegativity” (p. 385). Several other studies have found that accepting churches, like MCC, have assisted gay, lesbian, and queer individuals in their process of integrating their spiritual and sexual identities (Lukenbill, 1998; McQueeney, 2003; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

It is important to note, though, that not all of the participants in this study were satisfied with MCC. Several mentioned, as did Laura, that “it’s a church about being gay.” She elaborated:

I just want to be able to go to place where it doesn't matter. I don't want to go to church and be like, “Hey, you're gay and we're gay. God loves gay. We're gay. Yay. Praise Jesus.” I don't want that. I just want a place where it's just not an issue. But I come back to the whole idea that if it's separate, it's inherently unequal.

In Thumma's (1991) study of gay Evangelicals, participants expressed similar feelings. For instance, one individual said that "I left the Metropolitan Community Church because I felt that they were putting gay before God" (p. 338). Another person from Thumma's study made a comment reiterating the inequality inherent in separate, pro-gay congregations:

I consciously chose to be a member of a predominantly non-gay congregation because I believe in the concept of the family of faith, the community of faith. Christians who are gay cannot afford the luxury of isolation. We have to be willing to risk the pain, the alienation, the separation, if we are to achieve any semblance of dialogue. (p. 342)

*Faith Development and Sexual Identity Development Are*

*Fluid and Intertwined Constructions*

The third and final conclusion is that faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. This conclusion fits nicely with postmodern notions of identity, which allow for multiplicity and flexibility. According to Clark and Dirkx (2000), postmodernism is "more than the multiplicity of roles; it's the awareness of multiple selves within these roles" (p. 109). Similar to ecological systems theory mentioned above, postmodernism is "a way to talk about and legitimate plurality, complexity, diversity, and the unremittingly contextual nature of human functioning" (Applegate, 2000, p. 150). Finally, this third conclusion is related to queer theory. According to Jagose (1996), the notion of queer is "disruptive to received understandings of identity" (p. 99) and, instead, focuses on the fluidity and multiplicity of the self. He



goes on to say that queer theory “stretches the boundaries of identity categories” (p. 101) and disregards “the distinctions between various forms of marginalized sexual identification” (p. 101). Talburt and Steinberg (2000) maintain that being queer includes identifying with some sort of non-normative sexuality. In this study, there were two participants who identified as queer: Sarah, who characterized herself solely as queer, and Logan, who identified sexually as gay and politically as queer.

Some might question the fact that this study is based on postmodern or queer notions of identity and that it has produced a constructivist grounded theory. I would like to address these points, but first I will provide a brief description of constructivist grounded theory. Constructivists acknowledge that researchers affect data and that data and analysis should be understood in the context of time, place, situation, and culture (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory produces interpretive rather than positivist theory, and emphasizes the phenomena of study instead of explanation and prediction. “This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities” (Charmaz, p. 126).

Queer theory provided a theoretical framework by which to understand participants’ experiences of conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. I did not incorporate the deconstructive aspect of queer theory. Indeed, this study focused on the construction of a theory of internal conflict resolution. Queer theory was nevertheless a useful lens to understanding paradoxical aspects of identity. It allowed me to distinguish between sexual desire, behavior, and identity, and to emphasize the fluidity of faith and sexual identities. Surprisingly, participants attended to the non-normative aspects of their faith more so than their sexual identities. This non-normative faith constituted a move away from the institutionalized church and organized religion.

I have provided an illustrative model of the process of internal conflict resolution that, at first glance, appears to be linear and concrete (see Figure 4). However, I urge readers to recognize that resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is, as this conclusion states, a fluid process. Rust (2003) elucidated that “although models are developed to *describe* psychological and social phenomena, when they are used in efforts to predict or facilitate the processes they describe, they become *prescriptive*” (p. 239). Therefore, a word of caution is necessary: This substantive theory is based on the 15 individuals who participated in this study, my own subjectivity, and the context of time, place, situation, and culture. Applegate (2000) highlighted the point I am making:

From a postmodern perspective, we recognize that the stories we draw on in our clinical work [or research interviews] are texts written by authors whose place in historical time, life experiences, and personal proclivities shape both the plot of the story and the way it was originally told. Moreover, depending on our own interests, life histories, and dynamics both conscious and unconscious, we are attracted to certain stories more than others. (p. 142)

In this study, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions. To begin with, the development of faith is mediated by sexual identity. Participants explained that if they were not gay, lesbian, or queer, then their faith might be different today. Jake illustrated this point:

If I was straight, I would still be attending the Church of Christ and maybe even have a kid or something. Because that would be all I knew. So I’m kind of glad for that. I’m kind of glad that I . . . got to see a bigger world.

Mark, who grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, said that he "never questioned" his religious beliefs until he started experiencing same-sex desires. Both Jake and Mark have since left their childhood churches, mainly as a result of the conflict brought about by being gay. Additionally, when I asked Sarah, who grew up Catholic, how much her decision to reject Christianity had to do with sexual identity, she answered, "100 %." Allen made a similar statement when he said that, "a lot of friends put up with a lot from me because I would always have to cling to their faith because I didn't have any of my own—to a point because of homosexuality."

The most well known theory of faith development was established by Fowler (1981), and includes six stages of faith: intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith. Although there is an abundance of research utilizing Fowler's stages of faith, I have not found any studies that examined faith stages focusing specifically on gay, lesbian, and queer individuals. This study provides implications for Fowler's theory of faith development. Because participants were forced at an early age to confront differences in their experiences of the world and their religious beliefs, they moved through Fowler's stages of faith quickly. Jake, for one, had to "force" himself to "think differently." He said, "I'm glad I had to force myself to step outside of myself at a younger age and [tell myself] 'I am okay.' I think that's made me stronger."

Fowler's individuative-reflective faith stage includes critically reflecting on and examining worldviews, focusing specifically on tensions between group membership and individualism. This stage corresponds with the reflection undertaken by participants in this study as well as the formation of personalized faith. In addition to the individuative-

reflective faith stage, many found themselves reaching the conjunctive faith stage. In this phase, people recognize that there are several dimensions to truth and see the benefits of other faith traditions. One participant, Laura, became involved in Native American spirituality. She described her experience by saying that “it was cool and it was a whole different kind of system [than Christianity]. I would never have said that I wasn't Christian but there was room for me to bring that into [the Native American] lodge.” Overall, participants critically reflected on their religious upbringing, understood the importance of different faith traditions, and became more open-minded about their faiths. According to Fowler (1981), these tasks usually do not occur until individuals reach mid-life. Although further research is needed, it appears that participants in this study moved through Fowler's faith stages more rapidly than usual because of the conflict they experienced between sexual identity and religious beliefs. This rapid progression may be a manifestation of the participants' high reflective abilities, advanced education, and resolution of the conflict.

Not only is faith development mediated by sexual identity, but faith influences sexual identity development. Cass' (1979) theory of gay and lesbian identity development is the most widely used theory in the literature on sexual identity development, and includes the stages of identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. There is a dearth of literature discussing sexual identity development for non-heterosexual Christians. However, Savin-Williams (1990) and Wagner et al. (1994) both reported that having a Christian upbringing slows the process of sexual identity development. Additionally, Shallenberger (1996) explained that “the experience of coming to accept oneself as gay

or lesbian is very difficult, particularly if it is complicated by an intense religious commitment” (p. 204).

I came to the same conclusion in this study; although all of the participants reached identity synthesis where they recognize sexuality as one aspect of their larger identities, having a Christian upbringing did prolong sexual identity development. For example, as early as the initial stage of identity confusion, participants were faced not only with dissonance between their assumed sexuality and their same-sex attractions, but also with the dissonance between Christian doctrine on homosexuality and their same-sex desires. This added component complicated and prolonged the process of sexual identity development. One participant, Luke, explained that he questioned his faith upbringing as well as his sexual identity, and “those two questions informed each other.” Allison’s faith did not leave any space for homosexuality: “I always stayed in our little bubble of Christian friends. So, that’s just what I was expected to do and who I was expected to be.” It was only when she met co-workers at her new job that she started to “get out of that box” of Christianity and explore her sexual identity.

Participants also described their faith and sexual identity development as ongoing. Trey, for instance, admitted that “things may change for me,” such as religious affiliation and having a partner. Allen also talked about change and evolution, and made this comment: “I guess my faith [specifically] in Christianity is dead, but I think faith [in general] is something that’s alive and is always changing and always will.” Shallenberger (1996) echoed the idea that, “coming out is, of course, not a simply linear process. It typically includes movement forward and backward in response to life’s events and experiences” (p. 198).

### *Summary*

In summary, there were three conclusions based on the findings of this study: (a) resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution; (b) personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs; and (c) faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing.

First, the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs consisted of five stages: an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling individuals forward, steps of working through the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict.

Next, this five-stage process was affected in every stage by personal and contextual factors. Personal factors included reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity and humor. Participants who were able to rely on these personal factors were able to move through the process of resolving conflict easier than those who did not. In addition to personal factors, conflict resolution was affected by the contextual factors of family, community resources, and church doctrine. Those who had more positive environments or contexts had less trouble resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Finally, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. Faith development is mediated by sexual identity, and sexual identity development is influenced by faith upbringing. In addition to the mutuality of these concepts,

participants emphasized the on-going and continual nature of identity development. In other words, they were open to future changes and possibilities regarding their faith and sexual identities. This third conclusion corresponds to concepts from several theories or ways of knowing including postmodernism, constructivist grounded theory, and queer theory.

### Implications for Practice

In addition to the theoretical implications included in the conclusion and discussion section, this study has several practice implications for social work and faith communities. First and foremost, it contributes to social work practice with gay, lesbian, and queer populations by providing a substantive theory by which these individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Understanding the process of resolving conflict will help practitioners provide services to individuals who are going through it. Professionals who are familiar with the process of conflict resolution can begin by normalizing their client's experiences. Further, if they are able to identify where their clients are in the resolution process, practitioners can introduce clients to pertinent resources and information. Finally, future research, as described in the next section, will provide additional practice implications, such as specific evidence-based interventions for each stage of the process.

Along with social work practice implications, this study has implications for faith communities. Christian churches that condemn homosexuality must be aware of the ways in which their stances on homosexuality affect gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. In initially responding to the conflict between church doctrine and same-sex attraction, participants experienced depression. This response is

not surprising, considering some of the messages they receive from their churches. The Jehovah's Witness organization, for example, will disfellowship individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or queer. In some circumstances, as with one participant in this study, Mark, individuals lose regular contact with their family members and friends who are part of the church. This type of isolation does not bring individuals back into the fold, as many churches hope, but instead results in adverse and angry reactions. If churches that condemn homosexuality want to bring gay, lesbian, and queer individuals back into their congregations, they must understand that strategies of condemnation and separation will not work.

Finally, welcoming Christian churches, such as MCC, Unitarian Universalist churches, and Episcopal churches, should also be aware of their important role in the spiritual development of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. Participants in this study expressed appreciation for congregations like these; however, several said that their spiritual and religious needs were not met by churches that overly attended to sexual orientation. These churches did not accept them as people, but as gay, lesbian, and queer people. Welcoming churches, therefore, should try to balance their focus of receiving people of all sexual orientations with their general spiritual and religious teachings. They should recognize that most people are primarily involved in church in order to meet their faith needs.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between



their sexual identity and religious beliefs. Based on the findings of this qualitative study, I have five recommendations for future research related to this topic.

First, this study was limited in that it only included two individuals who identify as queer and three individuals from underrepresented racial groups. It should be repeated with recruitment geared towards these two populations in order to reveal whether or not the theory of conflict resolution holds true for them as well. In particular, literature shows that those growing up in African American churches have unique experiences around homosexuality (Cohen, 2003). Cohen described the plight of African American gay and lesbian individuals:

When faced with the devastation of racism, the cost of silence and invisibility seemed a willing payment from lesbian and gay community members for the support, caring, and protection of members of the black community, and, more importantly, the support and acceptance of immediate family members. (p. 49)

This idea was echoed by one participant in this study, Melanie, who is biracial. Half Caucasian and half African-American, she described her experiences as a biracial lesbian in high school:

I went to a high school that was very racist so I had to deal with that as well [as the homophobia]. And I think that's also part of the reason why I ignored it [same-sex attraction] and didn't want to talk to anybody about it. Because I was so afraid to walk the halls as a person of color, let alone as someone of a different sexual orientation.

My second recommendation is that this study should be duplicated with other populations in order to comprehensively understand the process of resolving the conflict

between sexual identity and religious beliefs. For instance, individuals who identify as bisexual and transgendered also go through this conflict. It will be important to compare this study's model of conflict resolution to the unique experiences of these individuals. This will reveal aspects of the process that are unique to bisexual and transgendered individuals and were not present in this study.

Third, this research should also be replicated with individuals of other faith backgrounds, as Christianity is not the only religion that condemns homosexuality. In order to form a comprehensive theory of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs, all individuals who experience this conflict must be included, such as those who have grown up in the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

In addition to repeating the study as mentioned above, my fourth recommendation is that large-scale quantitative studies should be completed in order to generalize the theory of resolving conflict. This in-depth qualitative study explored the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religion. I interviewed 15 individuals, and formed a theory of conflict resolution based on their experiences. Based on the limitations of this study, this theory is incomplete. In a quantitative study, a researcher could develop a scale based on the theory and ask individuals who resolved this conflict whether or not they have experienced the theory's phases.

Finally, because this study was exploratory in nature, I only provided initial understanding of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. However, it is my hope that this information will be built upon so that helping professionals and social workers will learn about effective interventions for individuals at

various stages of this process. Therefore, future research should attempt to connect information learned about this process to practical interventions to be used in counseling gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing.

### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. I completed in-depth interviews with 15 participants, and analyzed transcripts of the interviews. Based on this grounded theory analysis, there were three conclusions: (a) resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution; (b) personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs; and (c) faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. In addition to discussing these three conclusions in this chapter, I also explored the theoretical and practical implications of this study. Theoretically, this research advances the literature related to faith, sexual identity, and transformational learning. Practically, it provides helping professionals and social workers with a working model highlighting the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Finally, I provided five recommendations for future research.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## Abbreviation Definitions

AA—Alcoholics Anonymous

AIDS—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

CCD—Confraternity of Christian Doctrine

ELCA—Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

FWB—Free Will Baptists

HIV—Human Immunodeficiency Virus

MCC—Metropolitan Community Churches

NASW—National Association of Social Workers

PCUSA—Presbyterian Church of the United States of America

SBC—Southern Baptist Convention

USCC—United States Catholic Church

UU—Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

WTB—Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society

## Appendix B

## Recruitment Flyer

**Have you experienced and addressed a conflict and between your  
SEXUAL IDENTITY  
and your  
RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING?**

My name is Denise Levy and I am a doctoral student in the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia. I am interested in talking with you about your experiences of being a gay, lesbian, or queer identified individual with a Christian upbringing. In particular, I am interested in the process by which you resolved or addressed the conflict between your sexual identity and your religious beliefs. For your participation, you will receive a \$15 Borders gift certificate upon the conclusion of the initial interview.

**In order to participate in the study, all of the following must apply. You must:**

- 1) Be at least 18 years old
- 2) Have at least a high school education, GED, or equivalent
- 3) Live within a 3-hour car drive from Athens, Georgia
- 4) Self-identify as gay, lesbian, or queer
- 5) Have a Christian upbringing
- 6) Have experienced and addressed conflict between your religious beliefs and sexual identity
- 8) Be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview, lasting no more than 120 minutes
- 9) Be willing to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary. This follow-up interview will be by phone and will not exceed 30 minutes

The interview will take place at a site comfortable for both of us. Interviews will be totally private and confidential. They have to be tape-recorded for transcription, but the tape will be destroyed after the research is complete. Naturally, names and any other identifying information will be removed from the transcripts, and fake names will be used in my report.

The study is entitled “Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing: Exploring the Process of Resolving Conflict between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs.” If you are interested in this study, please call me (Denise Levy) at (706) 338-8653. I am available Monday through Friday from 9:00am until 8:00pm. Please leave a voice message with your contact information if I should happen to be away. I look forward to talking with you!

*This study was funded by the Center for Research and Engagement in Diversity's Seed Grant, which is made possible by the UGA President's Venture Fund and the American Psychological Association.*

## Appendix C

### Pre-Screening Interview

My name is Denise L. Levy. Thank you for calling me regarding “Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing: Exploring the Process of Resolving Conflict between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs.” I would like to ask you a few questions in order to determine whether you may be eligible for the research. Before I begin the screening I would like to tell you a little bit about the research. The purpose of this study is to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. In a moment I will explain further what is required of participants in this study.

Would you like to continue with the screening? The screening will take about 10 minutes. I will ask you about your religious background, your sexual orientation, your willingness to participate in the study, and some demographic factors. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or are uncomfortable answering, and you may stop at any time. Your participation in the screening is voluntary. Your answers will be confidential. No one will know your answers except for the research team. If you do not participate in the study, your pre-screening information will be destroyed. If you do qualify for the research, decide to participate, and sign the research informed consent form, your screening answers will be kept in a locked cabinet located in a locked office.

Would you like to continue with the screening?

(If no, thank the individual and hang up) (If yes, continue with the screening)

- What is your full name?
- How old are you (in years)?
- What is your gender?
- What is your race?
- What is the highest year of school that you completed?
- Do you identify as a gay, lesbian, or queer individual?
- If you identify as queer, have you ever identified as gay or lesbian?
- What town or city did you grow up in?
- Did you grow up in a Christian family?
- If so, what was your religious affiliation?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low involvement and 5 being high involvement, how involved were you in your church?
- Did you experience a conflict between your sexual identity and religious beliefs?
- Have you addressed this conflict in some way?
- Are you willing to participate in a 120-minute, face-to-face interview?
- Are you willing to participate in a 30-minute, follow-up interview by phone if it is necessary?



- Where do you live?
- How can I contact you in the future for further participation?

Thank you for answering the screening questions.

(Indicate whether the person is eligible, requires additional screening, or is not eligible and explain why.)

Do you have any questions about the screening or the research? I am going to give you a couple of telephone numbers to call if you have any questions later. Do you have a pen? If you have questions about the research screening, you may call me at 706.338.8653 and I will answer your questions. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please call the UGA Human Subjects at (706) 542-3199.

Thank you again for your willingness to answer my questions.

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

#### **Background Questions:**

- Can you think of an experience you had at church that is related to the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality?
- What did you, your family, and your church believe about homosexuality?

**Research Question 1:** How do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?

#### **Corresponding Interview Questions:**

- What kind of conflict have you experienced between your religious upbringing and your sexual identity?
- How did you feel about this conflict?
- How did this conflict impact your life?

**Research Question 2:** What personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?

#### **Corresponding Interview Questions:**

- What kinds of things or people influenced how you've dealt with this conflict?
- How did your environment (church, family, friends, school, community, and so forth) shape your efforts to resolve this conflict?
- What personal characteristics or traits influenced how you've dealt with this conflict?
- How, if at all, was this conflict related to your decision to come out?

**Research Question 3:** What is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict?

#### **Corresponding Interview Questions:**

- How did you cope or deal with this conflict?
- How did you move from experiencing the conflict to resolving the conflict?

**Research Question 4:** How do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

#### **Corresponding Interview Questions:**

- How do you make sense of your sexual identity and Christian upbringing today?
- Some people say that religiousness and spirituality are two different things. What do you think? Do you consider yourself a religious person, a spiritual person, both, or neither?
- To participate in this study you identified that you had addressed the conflict between your religious upbringing and sexual identity. Some people might say that a conflict between these two things can never be resolved. What do you think about this?

## Appendix E

## Debriefing Statement

The following information may be helpful to you if you experience any emotional or psychological stress due to the experiences brought up in this research. The following counselors and agencies can be a valuable resource for you. They specialize in issues pertinent either to gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals or to spiritual and religious needs. All of these agencies are located in the North Georgia area.

**Absolute Wellness**

2484 Briarcliff Road  
Suite 22-B  
Atlanta, Georgia 30329  
(404) 329-2315

**All Saints Christ's Church United**

2352 Bolton Road NW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318  
(404) 605-7140

**Atlanta Interfaith AIDS Network, Inc.**

139 Ralph McGill Boulevard NE  
Atlanta, Georgia 30308  
(404) 874-8686

**Care and Counseling Center of Georgia**

1814 Clairmont Road  
Decatur, Georgia 30033  
(404) 636-1457

**The Center for Counseling Services**

1847-A Peeler Road  
Atlanta, Georgia 30338  
(770) 394-5447

**Family Counseling Service, Inc. (Athens & Winder)**

1435 Oglethorpe Avenue  
Athens, Georgia 30606

**Family Counseling Service, Inc. (Athens & Winder)**

280 North Broad Street  
Winder  
(706) 549-7755

**First Metropolitan Community Church of Atlanta**

1379 Tullie Road  
Atlanta, Georgia 30329  
(404) 325-4143

**Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church of Athens**

(706) 227-9343  
<http://ourhopemcc.com>

**Peachtree Counseling Center**

3434 Roswell Road NW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30305  
(404) 842-3150

**Samaritan Counseling Center of Northeast Georgia**

1690 South Milledge Avenue  
Athens, Georgia 30605  
(706) 369-7911

**Whosoever Magazine**

An online magazine for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians  
<http://www.whosoever.org/index.shtml>