Spring 6-12-2022

LGBTQ+ Congregants Navigating Identity in the Context of "Welcoming but Not Affirming" Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Non-denominational Religious Institutions: A Queer Narrative Analysis

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analysis

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelors of Arts

in

Social Work

Honors Thesis Chair:

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Portland State University

2022

Abstract

Welcoming but not affirming Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational churches invite LGBTQ+ people to attend their church, but do not affirm their identity as a gender and/or sexual minority. Because of this, they restrict LGBTQ+ attendees from participating in leadership, paid staff positions, and ministry work. LGBTQ+ attendees are often not aware of these restrictive policies initially. The current study aims to examine how LGBTQ+ people navigate their faith and identity within welcoming but not affirming church spaces through narrative analysis. Fifteen participants engaged in an interview, where they were asked about their experience within welcoming but not affirming church spaces. Participants discussed the need for clarity and communication from welcoming but not affirming churches regarding their beliefs and policies regarding gender and sexual minorities. They shared stories of losing leadership positions and losing community. Various mental health concerns, a need to mask one's true identity, and a feeling of ostracization are discussed. Another point of discussion is areas of resilience—how LGBTQ+ people have survived and thrived spiritually after their experience within a non-affirming congregation. Going forward, interviewees described a need for LGBTQ+ representation within church spaces. The study closes with a brief discussion of the aforementioned identified themes, along with limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Dedication

To my sister, who uplifted me and served as my cheerleader along the way,

And my cousin, who helped me accept myself when I was only beginning to.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Larry Martinez, for jumping in, somewhat on a whim, to provide support and guidance for this project and champion my determination and ambition. I would also like to appreciate Dr. Nicholas Smith and doctoral students Faviola Robles-Saenz and Emily Ready for providing resources and words of wisdom. All of the above made time within their busy schedules every week to support me with an idea for a research project that is near to my heart.

Also an important part of this process was Dr. Don Anderson, in whose writing course I wrote a small, initial essay about the topic. Anderson challenged me to grow not only as a writer but as a critical thinker, and it was within that course four years ago that I gained my passion for queer advocacy within non-affirming spaces.

Research Question: (How do queer congregants navigate their identities in the context of "welcoming but not affirming" Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational religious institutions, and what can be learned from their experience?)

<p style="text-align:center">Background and Justification</p>

Welcoming But Not Affirming

An overwhelming majority of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have adopted a "welcoming but not affirming" stance towards LGBTQ+ inclusion within the church. This means that churches welcome LGBTQ+ people through the doors and invite them to attend service, but do not validate or accept their identity as LGBTQ+. Unless a person "changes" their orientation or agrees to "holy celibacy," the LGBTQ+ attendee is barred from leadership in every capacity: from the children's ministry, worship team, team meetings, leading Bible study community groups, or being in any paid staff position. This position gained popularity in 1998 when Evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz published his book, "Welcoming But Not Affirming" (Grenz 1998). Though this view has become mainstream among Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, it remains largely unspoken to congregants and is often not communicated until a member has significantly integrated themselves into the church community.

The Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches have a history of exclusion towards LGBTQ+ people. Christianity Today, a popular Evangelical magazine, called the LGBTQ+ community a "counter-evangelistic" group in the 1980s, and many Evangelical and Pentecostal communities see being part of the LGBTQ+ community as incompatible

with a Christian identity (Trammell 2015). LGBTQ+ discrimination is prevalent within the Evangelical and Pentecostal community, with many LGBTQ+ folks being barred from marriage within the church, ministerial positions, and involvement in church leadership and volunteer roles due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Brandon Robertson, an author, lost a book deal from a prominent Christian publisher shortly before its set publishing date after coming out as LGBTQ+ (Dias 2015). A Portland pastor, Adam Phillips, lost all funding for his up-and-coming church upon stating that he planned to have an LGBTQ+ affirming and inclusive congregation (Eckstrom 2015). Discrimination from Evangelical and Pentecostal organizations towards LGBTQ+ individuals, though often undocumented, is pervasive.

LGBTQ+ people, more than their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts, find themselves stepping away from the church and organized religion altogether (Post, 2020). This is most likely due not to a lack of interest in being religious, but rather the marginalization and discrimination often experienced by LGBTQ+ folks in welcoming but not affirming spaces. Research shows that a majority of LGBTQ+ people (79%) perceive Evangelical Protestantism as unfriendly towards the LGB community (Barringer, 2020). LGBTQ+ people often express having a difficult time locating a church that would allow them to attend and participate fully while still allowing and accepting their sexual orientation and gender identity (as opposed to requiring them to be permanently celibate in order to participate; Harris et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ people do have an interest in pursuing Christian ministerial education and roles in religious leadership, but often do not feel empowered to do so as an LGBTQ+ individual (Harris et al., 2020).

Perceived malalignment between one's religious life and sexual identity poses various risks to the LGBTQ+ population, including (but not limited to) ostracization, loss of self-esteem, and suicide (Harris et al., 2020). In recent years, LGBTQ+-identified people have begun to step forward documenting their experiences within the Evangelical/Pentecostal church and how a welcoming but not affirming organization has affected their psychosocial-spiritual well-being (Garcia, 2020, Gold et al., 2008).

Bait & Switch

It can be argued that there is an intentionality behind the way in which welcoming but not affirming churches present themselves and their policies to congregants that is in line with the "bait and switch" technique commonly used by dishonest business marketers. To bait and switch in marketing is to advertise one product or message as "bait," and upon the consumer's arrival, switch to advertise a different, higher-cost product. For churches, this is a religious marketing technique that is used out of an assertion that not as many people would show interest in "buying the product" (in this case, "buying" the message of religious salvation, continuing church attendance, and tithing to the church) if the church was honest about the message that they are "selling" upon initial contact. Instead of being honest regarding church policy and beliefs from the outset, welcoming but not affirming churches stick to making their presentation and product look as appealing as possible at face value. Often they draw LGBTQ+ folks in by initially focusing solely on the "welcoming" aspect of their policy. By dodging the topic and cluttering their social media with messages such as "Welcome home!" and "All are welcome!" the hope is that the bait will be alluring enough to draw LGBTQ+ people in to commit to religious salvation.

The "bait" experience of attending these churches is strategically made to integrate into a person's psychological, social, and spiritual life from the point of initial contact. On a psychological level, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches (and their similar denominational counterparts) give different messages and cues which encourage congregants to be emotionally vulnerable within services. This can be seen in the traditional "altar call" in which congregants are encouraged to come to the altar to receive prayer with a ministerial staff or leader regarding struggles touched upon within the sermon. During the altar call, it is common for congregants to confide in ministerial staff and leaders regarding past or present traumas regarding sensitive topics such as abuse, neglect, assault, familial issues, relationship issues, mental health issues, addiction, and the like. The congregant is likely to form emotional ties to the church after these experiences and view the church as an important source of psychological support. On a social level, these churches work to weave the new members into their community through "friendship Evangelism" (leaders befriending and initiating outside-of-church contact with new members in order to evangelize), small groups, and other social events—often with the goal of making the church a congregant's primary support system. On a spiritual level, congregants are encouraged in their times of emotional vulnerability to "accept Jesus into their heart" and start living by the ways of the church, with the church.

It is essential to note that none of this psychosocial-spiritual interaction is inherently bad, nor is it considered to be "bait" within every Christian church. For many, the church can be a healthy experience that encourages psychosocial-spiritual well-being (Lim 2016, Makridis et al., 2020). As is the case in any "bait and switch" interaction,

"bait" can only be "bait" when there is a "switch" involved. For churches that are clear regarding their policies and give congregants a view of the "full picture" upon the point of initial contact, congregants have the opportunity to be fully informed before consenting to their experience. It becomes dishonest and manipulative when a church uses psychosocial-spiritual interaction as "bait" before later revealing the "switch"—the fact that they do not affirm non-heterosexual, non-cisgender orientations. The "bait" of the psychosocial-spiritual church experience within welcoming but not affirming organizations is used to create a situation in which the LGBTQ+ congregant becomes partly or wholly reliant on the church community to meet their psychological, social, and spiritual needs—and that is often when the "switch" happens. Some LGBTQ+ folks discover the "switch" upon attempting to get involved within church leadership, whereas others discover this upon "coming out" after already being involved in leadership activities for an extended period of time. Such was the case for Josh Canfield, who was asked to step down from Hillsong's leadership after over eight years of service after the megachurch pastor learned of his sexual orientation (Church Clarity 2019). This lack of clarity can be discombobulating and detrimental for LGBTQ+ people, and the process of leaving a church that one is intensely connected to can be incredibly trauma-inducing (Garcia, 2020, Gold et al., 2008). For someone who is extremely interconnected with church life, it can feel nearly impossible. As author and spiritual influencer Kevin Garcia details their experience in their book, Bad Theology Kills: "We leave the abusive places, but the abuse lingers in our bodies. The spiritual scars keep our perspectives rooted in fear" (Garcia, 92).

While the secular, for-profit marketplace has strict laws and regulations protecting against false advertising, within the welcoming but not affirming church, the basic standard of accountability and transparency regarding product and policy is not upheld. Church Clarity, an organization that encourages churches all around America to publicly post their policies on their online database, speaks of how welcoming but not affirming organizations have created an environment where ambiguity and a lack of transparency is normalized in an attempt to draw in congregants.

> "Many churches have avoided fully or clearly disclosing their policies out of a desire to be 'seeker-sensitive,' that is, wanting to attract 'seekers' and convert them into loyal 'customers.'... It often takes multiple conversations and years of relationship-building before clarity is delivered -- and by then, the damage is already done. It is unreasonable to expect people to jump through hoops to learn how policies that affect them will be enforced." (Church Clarity).

Purpose

The aim of this study is to document the effects of the ambiguity regarding a "welcoming but not affirming" Evangelical/Pentecostal church stance as it pertains to the participation and inclusion of its LGBTQ+ attendees. By uplifting LGBTQ+ narratives and documenting the effects of church policy on psychosocial-spiritual wellbeing, as well as documenting the effects of the lack of clarity regarding inclusion policies, the importance and severity of LGBTQ+ religious exclusion will hopefully be brought to the forefront and addressed by Evangelical and Pentecostal churches around the nation. Congregational leadership can use the information to inform their policy and practices, as well as be encouraged to provide clarity regarding said policies and practices to

congregants, in order to facilitate the psychosocial-spiritual well-being of their LGBTQ+

attendees and avoid further traumatization of the LGBTQ+ community.

Methods

This study was conducted in a qualitative fashion through the administration and

analysis of interviews conducted by the researcher. Criteria for interview subjects were

self-identification as LGBTQ+ and self-described experience within the Evangelical or

Pentecostal church. Recruitment took place via convenience sampling from members of

the online "Exvangelical" community via Reddit and Instagram, as well as through

snowball sampling via the dissemination of fliers from existing participants. The initial

convenience sample consisted of three participants.

Participants were sent a thorough consent form and demographic survey regarding

sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious history and beliefs before the completion

of the interview. Interviews were semi-structured and took place via Zoom, with a set of

questions given to participants one week in advance. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes

to an hour, and each participant was asked a set of 16 questions. Questions entailed

different aspects of their experience in their previous and/or current church(es) as an

LGBTQ+ identified person, including questions such as: "How has attending a

welcoming but not affirming church as an LGBTQ+ person affected your social,

psychological, and spiritual wellbeing?", "How aware were you of your church's beliefs

and policies regarding LGBTQ+ participation and inclusion when you first began

attending?", "If you have since left your church, what would you say were contributing

factors to making the decision to leave?", and "What, if anything, could Evangelical,

Pentecostal, and non-denominational churches do differently to clarify their policies and

help LGBTQ+ people feel welcomed and affirmed?" An opportunity was also given during the interview for participants to share any personal stories or anecdotes that they believe are relevant to the research.

The research was approved by the Portland State University Institutional Review Board and supervised by faculty advisor Dr. Larry Martinez. The study will be published on PDXScholar upon completion. Data will be stored in a password-encrypted Microsoft OneNote folder for three years after the research publication date.

Participants

The researcher recruited a total of 25 participants, and 15 participants followed through on completing the consent form, demographic survey, and interview. The average age of the fifteen participants is approximately 27, with an age range of 18-37. Out of the fifteen participants, nine identified as female, three identified as male, and three identified as non-binary. Six participants identified as currently religious, and three of the six were currently regularly attending a church congregation. Nine participants had over twenty years of experience within a church congregation, with the other six participants having anywhere from six to nineteen years of church experience. All participants attended their congregations during childhood and adolescence. Eleven participants self-identified as white.

Analysis

A variety of themes were discovered upon analysis of the information given by participants during interviews. Though each story was unique, and contained valuable insight into the LGBTQ+ experience within the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational church, for the sake of generalizability, criteria for a "theme" within

the data analysis required that over half of interview participants discuss a particular phenomenon. The following themes will be discussed within the present analysis: "Addressing Ambiguity," "Limited Participation," "Masking," "Mental Health Concerns," "Belonging & Ostracization," "Spiritual Resilience," and "Visibility & Representation."

Addressing Ambiguity

"Anything involving identity politics [saying that] "all lives matter" or "everybody is welcome"... it's just a blanket statement. Be specific about what you actually believe, and specifically what identities you are talking about." —Ramya

During interviews, participants were asked about how their church addressed the conversation regarding LGBTQ+ participation and inclusion. Participants described a lack of discussion around the topic, as well as ambiguous statements within their congregations. Juliana confided that the avoidance of the topic was so severe within her congregation that the church acted as though queer people did not even exist—something she noted to be an intentional, bait and switch ploy. "They don't talk about it so [that] no one can say that they're being homophobic," she described. Another participant, Charlie, also alluded to this phenomenon, stating that the absence of conversation and the silence in itself speaks volumes. "It's the most lukewarm way [that] you can be anti-queer without saying that you're anti-queer."

This ambiguity creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ congregants who wish to explore their identity or come out of the closet—due to the fear of the unknown consequences of doing so. Participants who decided against coming out during their church experience noted not knowing whether or not they would be accepted and included within their church community as a primary reason.

For LGBTQ+ participants that did minimal identity exploring during the period of their church attendance, the ambiguity from the church made identity exploration feel too risky or like something that was not even an option for them. One participant, Mallory, noted that the church's messages created internalized homophobia, inhibiting identity exploration. "I never felt like I was held back, because I just wouldn't allow myself to dig deep into that part of me to really figure it out." Jayla, another interviewee, noted that evaluating her own identity was "never even an option for me." Church ambiguity and internalized homophobia contributed to participants' experience of self-repression, as they pushed away non-heterosexual feelings and desires, hoping that the repression would permanently subdue their queerness. Another participant, Ramya, described this struggle: "For a really long time, I held out hopes that I wasn't queer, because, in my head at the time, it would have just complicated my life so much, and caused me so much loss." During the interview, Ramya reflected on an old journal entry written during the period of their church attendance. "I keep waiting for the day that I'm gonna wake up and this was all just a phase, and I can relax and can breathe again," the journal entry read. Another interviewee, Emmy, described a similar experience of subduing queerness in hopes of it being "just a phase."

For Chris, a participant that did decide to come out to their congregation while being an active part of the church, the church's policies on LGBTQ+ inclusion and participation were not easily available or known by most members of the congregation. "I didn't know what [the policies] were clearly until I needed to, and had to find them myself and ask for them." Even then, he confided, these conversations about church policy were only allowed to take place one-on-one and behind closed doors.

Regardless of participants' journey toward identity formation and coming out, when discussing this ambiguity, all participants noted that it was harmful to their identity formation in some way. When asked what these church spaces could do differently in order to prevent such future harm, participants strongly noted a need for upfrontness and clarity regarding church policy. One participant, Caitlin, found the lack of clarity to be "inviting people in under false pretenses"—a reference to the aforementioned bait and switch phenomenon. For churches whose primary claim is being "welcoming," Caitlin wished to remind them that it is honesty that is the best form of kindness. "I would rather walk into a church, and within five seconds hear that it's a non-affirming church [and] know where I stand, than think that I can be fully welcomed within the body of Christ, and then have to find out the hard way—after I've built those relationships; after it becomes so painful." Though upfrontness may be jarring, participants assured it to be necessary in order to reduce harm and traumatization resulting from being LGBTQ+ within welcoming but not affirming church spaces. Speaking from personal experience, Ramya encouraged the church to attend to this issue and address their own ambiguity, urging that "being vague does not help the identities that are struggling."

Limited Participation

"My gender debarred me from ministry. It didn't seem like it was even on my mental map." —Caitlin

Policies in welcoming but not affirming churches regarding limited participation within leadership, staff, and volunteer positions affect LGBTQ+ individuals—even individuals who choose not to come out to their congregation during their period of attendance. In the interview process within the current study, individuals who chose against coming out to their congregations cited fear of losing their leadership positions as one of the primary reasons (along with the aforementioned ambiguity of church policy)

for choosing so. A long-time church-goer, Tee, noted that their church's policies prevented them from coming out to their congregation, due to their heavy involvement in the church's student ministry and worship team. Fear of coming out due to the possibility of not being able to serve in a leadership capacity within the church also hindered Ramya from coming out as queer to some of her closest friends at the time, many of whom she served alongside as a student camp director and worship team member.

Other participants described experiences of being restricted from church involvement. Chris described being kicked off of the children's ministry team shortly before he was supposed to step up as the children's ministry director. Though Chris decided to continue attendance initially after being debarred from ministry, the longer he continued attending, "the more hurtful it became to be just sitting there without any kind of participation." Another interviewee, Mark Anthony, listed various limitations imposed on him at his Christian college after coming out, including not being allowed to be a student leader, an on-campus RA, or involved in any ministry realm within the campus church. He disclosed that people would frequently call the school's admissions department, requesting his expulsion due to his status as an openly gay student.

Mental Health Concerns

"I didn't know what depression felt like until I was removed from leadership in the church." —Mark

Anthony

Participants were asked: "How did your experience as an LGBTQ+ person within a welcoming but not affirming church organization affect your psychological well-being?" Numerous participants self-reported various mental health concerns. Two participants disclosed past experiences of suicidal ideation, and another noted: "I'm lucky I never felt suicidal, or anything like that. But I went through some dark times." Jayla,

another participant, alluded to the high suicide rate of LGBTQ+ teens. Regarding the

self-hatred and dissonance that comes from malalignment between faith and identity

(expressed beforehand within the literature review), Jayla reflects on the lives that have

been lost from suicide "because of the hate that they've been taught to feel about

themselves their entire life." It is known that LGBTQ+ youth are more than four times as

likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers and that an estimated over 1.8

million LGBTQ+ teens seriously contemplate suicide every year in the United States.

(Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020; The Trevor Project, 2022). Referencing the effects

of incongruence between faith and identity, Mallory confided: "When you don't accept

yourself for who you are, it causes a lot of mental health problems and hatred towards

yourself."

From the current data within the present queer narrative study, it can be implied

that it is the lack of acceptance from self and others which leads to self-hatred and causes

various psychological side effects to fester. Other self-reported psychological phenomena

included anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and self-injury. When

these symptoms continuously fester, it can lead to serious emotional damage (Garcia,

2020, Gold et al., 2008). One participant described, upon experiencing these symptoms

for an extended period, that they felt like a "shell of a person." As previously mentioned

within the literature review, these psychological impacts can continue to impact an

individual long after they have left the non-affirming church environment.

Ostracization

"We all have this intense human need to belong, right? That's the number one thing." —Eyla

The lack of acceptance that LGBTQ+ individuals within the current study

experienced within welcoming but not affirming congregations also led to a feeling of

ostracization from their community. Multiple participants reported fear regarding coming

out due to losing friends and close connections with fellow churchgoers. Eyla disclosed

her primary reason for choosing against coming out as bisexual within her Christian

college: "If anybody found out, all of these people who are so friendly to me would be

disgusted by me, they would hate me, they wouldn't talk to me—it was a really

horrifying feeling." Caitlin described a similar experience: "If they knew who I was, it

wasn't even [that] they wouldn't want to be my friends; they would hurt me, and I would

never see them again." Others disclosed experiences of losing close friends after

choosing to come out. The lack of acceptance within welcoming but not affirming spaces

can create an incredibly isolating environment for people questioning or coming to terms

with their identity. Emmy noted that upon discovering their queer identity in their early

teenage years, the lack of acceptance made them feel like an outsider, and the absence of

belonging was "secluding and scary, [and] a lonely place to be." LGBTQ+ people do not

need to know if they are "welcome" to come through the church doors and sit in the

pews; LGBTQ+ people need to know that they *belong*—and that cannot happen unless

they also feel accepted and included. Charlie reflected on being a teen and navigating

their faith and identity, stating that within this process it was "the absence of support that

[was] the most impactful…It's the silence that can do the most damage."

Contrary to the adverse, isolating environment described above, the goal of

religious spaces is to be a safe and authentic community-building environment where one

can feel belonging. Many participants cited the desire for community as what initially

drew them to church. Many participants also had positive social experiences while

attending church before questioning their queer identity. "I really had a sense of

community and family, and I felt like I had so much support," Rebecca described. At its best, religious spaces can and do provide a sense of meaning and purpose within lives and communities. During their interview, Emmy reminisced fondly on the big youth group events and worship services, saying that they found enjoyment in the "connected togetherness" that the church environment initially brought. "I think though that those fun big group events started being really not fun once I started realizing that I was queer," they stated somberly. The lack of acceptance for identifying as LGBTQ+ robs individuals of that experience of connected togetherness within a sacred space.

Masking

"I was living a double life; I felt like two different people." —Rebecca

Another prevalent socio-emotional phenomenon that interviewees experienced within welcoming but not affirming congregations is a "masking" of their true selves. Many individuals noted feeling like they were unable to be authentic within their relationships with fellow churchgoers upon discovering their sexual and/or gender identity. "I felt like I was always interacting with people through a mask," Caitlin described. "There wasn't a place to be my authentic self, so I had to be somebody else for a really long time," Eyla noted. For Eyla, this process entailed an intense pressure to perform, yet still being a "limited version" of herself, or rather, an "idea of who they think I should be." Others noted a similar feeling as though they were performing within church spaces, feeling as though they were portraying themselves as a character instead of their true selves. "I should have won a lot of Oscars by now," Mallory laughed, reflecting on their experience within their non-affirming congregation.

Not being able to be fully vulnerable and "themselves" in these interactions created distance in relationships as well as affected the LGBTQ+ individual's self-image.

Ramya felt as though she was living a double life, as she began to come out and live her day-to-day life as bisexual with her college friends, but continue to mask herself as heterosexual within the church. This affected her relationship with church connections and her view towards herself, saying: "I felt like I was lying to them. I felt like a fraud with my closest friends." Emmy resonated with the feeling of dishonesty, saying that not being honest with herself or the people around her affected her self-image to the point that she felt as though she was not a "good person." On a relational level, people noted that it caused a rift in social relationships and impacted their ability to receive positive social interaction within their church congregation. "You could only benefit positively from social interactions if you checked certain boxes because only people who fit in those certain boxes were allowed to fully be themselves," Charlie sighed, reflecting on their own social experience within their congregation. When a person has to fit into certain standards in order to maintain relationships with friends, loved ones, and their overall religious community, it is understandable that one would feel the need to mask their identity or perform for others in order to fit into a socially and religiously "acceptable" box. Some, such as Emmy and Charlie, alluded to this phenomenon as being one of the primary reasons why they decided to leave their church congregation. "Not being genuinely able to be myself was a big reason why I finally made that decision," Emmy noted. If the Christian community desires to create spaces of community and belonging in which LGBTQ+ individuals will maintain continued attendance, it is important that they feel accepted within these spaces for who they are—without feeling the need to mask or perform.

Spiritual Resilience

"You don't need religion to have God." —Jayla

The experience of being ostracized within the welcoming but not affirming church pushed folks to explore religious beliefs and spirituality outside of traditional Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational church spaces. To be able to challenge traditional thinking and develop this healthy sense of spirituality after existing within non-affirming spaces is a radical act of resilience. Charlie spoke of this resilience while telling their story, stating that "the reflection of the negative experience helped develop a healthier perception of self and a healthier perception of spirituality." Others who gained a healthier perception of self and faith noted the positive development of a more inclusive perspective regarding spirituality. Tee shared that in their journey navigating faith and identity, they learned that "God does not love me in spite of myself. God loves me because I am myself. And that was a revelation that I had that I wouldn't have had if I weren't queer or trans." Likewise, in the aftermath of being kicked out of his leadership position in children's ministry and leaving the church, Chris reflects: "You realize that you may not be welcome everywhere [that] God is—but God is everywhere."

Realizing that their spirituality can exist outside of the four walls of the church can be incredibly liberating for LGBTQ+ individuals who have had experiences within non-affirming congregations. Some note finding purpose, meaning, and sacred community within other spaces: weekly trivia nights with friends, sports teams, inclusive community events and spaces, and the LGBTQ+ community at large. "We would all meet at a bar and would play trivia, and we would say 'This is our church now.' We're all having communion in a way, like, eating fries and drinking beer and spending time with other people—and it felt so filling," Eyla shared. For Jayla, meeting LGBTQ+ friends within her roller derby team helped her to accept herself, finding spiritual healing in a

space where her identity was more normalized. Experiences within affirming communities, where one can fully be themselves and be fully accepted, are crucial in order to foster a sense of belonging.

Representation

"The only way to change is to actively try to learn and educate people on queer issues—and I don't think that cisgender, heterosexual men should be the ones doing that." —Mallory

When asked what the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and nondenominational church as a whole could do to help LGBTQ+ individuals feel more welcomed and affirmed, interviewees described a need for LGBTQ+ representation in the congregation, leadership, and church activities. Participants expressed that representation should be integrated into the existing everyday activities of the church, such as inclusive messages within sermons, acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ events (such as pride month) within the church's announcements, or LGBTQ-specific weekly small groups or Bible studies. "Talk about queer experiences. Make sure that it is a thing that is positively addressed within sermons," Juliana suggested. Some considered representation within leadership to be essential in order to feel affirmed. Eyla reflected on her own past experiences, wondering, "Can the church really help queer people feel affirmed? Or can it only help when queer people are the ones leading?" Interviewees reflected on the necessity of a church space in which lesbian and gay parents could teach kids at Sunday school, speakers that are of different genders and sexualities could preach, and LGBTQ+ ministry volunteers could fully participate. When it comes to LGBTQ+ individuals feeling validated and accepted, "representation matters," Jenna claimed. "Have queer individuals in prominent roles and leadership roles."

Discussion

Though the experiences of gender and sexual minorities within the welcoming but not affirming church differ from person to person, a handful of common themes emerged from the narratives they shared. Within the current research study, LGBTQ+ people described instances of limited participation or the fear of losing leadership roles within the church. There exists a lack of clarity regarding policies on inclusion and exclusion within welcoming but not affirming church spaces that must be addressed to avoid the future traumatization of LGBTQ+ individuals. The ambiguity and lack of inclusion within these religious spaces impacted participants' well-being in a variety of ways. Various mental health concerns were described in interviews, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Participants reported having to conceal who they authentically were and perform in a way that would maintain acceptance from others within the church. Despite the continuous masking in an effort to receive acceptance from their church community, LGBTQ+ people still reported feeling ostracized from the community, as though they did not truly belong. In order for gender and sexual minorities to feel a sense of belonging within the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational church, LGBTQ+ representation must be present within every aspect of the church's ministry.

Implications

The current research provides support for previous literature describing the lack of clarity within welcoming but not affirming church spaces. The ambiguity surrounding policy described within this study affirms stories that have been shared previously within literature and within LGBTQ+ Christian narratives. The ambiguity is part of the "bait and switch" process also shown to be applicable within the context of religious marketing. Previous theory can be informed by the unexpected positive aspects of attending a

welcoming but not affirming church such as LGBTQ+ individuals finding community in other spaces and reconciling their identities in a manner that maintains religiosity and queerness simultaneously. These phenomena can contribute valuable insight into gender and sexual minority resilience research.

Mental health providers, such as therapists, psychiatrists, and crisis workers should be mindful of the mental health concerns that are commonly experienced by sexual and gender minorities within welcoming but not affirming spaces. LGBTQ+ participants noted symptoms of depression, anxiety, and ostracization; therefore, it's likely that mental health providers will interact at some point in their career with a client that has lived experience regarding this topic.

The data found within this study can inform specific interventions for mental health providers when working with someone who has had lived experience within non-affirming spaces. Given the experience of not being accepted by others and not feeling able to accept oneself, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) may be a valuable intervention that encourages non-judgment and self-acceptance. For processing through experiences within the church that may have been harmful or traumatic, giving the power to the client to tell and reframe their story through narrative therapy could potentially be an empowering and healing intervention for clients. For participants who reported negative thinking patterns, invasive thoughts, and anxiety, cognitive-behavioral therapy could be a transformative practice. Mental health providers can prepare to work with this client population by educating themselves on common experiences, thoughts, and feelings that are interwoven into the experience of being LGBTQ+ in a non-affirming space.

Limitations

The present research study interviewed 15 participants. The small sample size provides the ability to thoroughly analyze each person's narrative, however, more research with a larger sample size would create a broader scope of data and allow more potential themes to emerge and be discussed. In addition to this, only welcoming but not affirming churches that were classified as Evangelical, Pentecostal, and nondenominational were included in the present analysis. Lastly, the gathered data was qualitative, which may not be as generalizable as a quantitative or mixed methods study. In order to gather statistical data regarding navigating faith and identity within welcoming but not affirming spaces, quantitative research would be needed.

Future Directions

Existing academic literature on welcoming but not affirming congregations is slim. But there lies a goldmine of knowledge within LGBTQ+ people's own experiences and narratives. By including LGBTQ+ voices within the academic literature and research itself and honoring their stories as valuable data, we can begin to fill the literature gap. By conducting additional studies in this area and increasing public awareness of the risks of ambiguity and exclusion of LGBTQ+ people, welcoming but not affirming churches can begin to be held accountable.

Within future research, the experiences of gender minorities specifically within the welcoming but not affirming church should be further explored. Individuals who are not cisgender and identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual experience the intersecting oppression of being both a gender and sexual minority, creating a particularly tough environment. Within the present study, only three participants identified as not cisgender.

The experience of being transgender or non-binary within the welcoming but not affirming church is especially unique and could offer a fresh perspective on navigating faith and identity within non-affirming spaces.

Conclusion

Religiosity is a central aspect of many people's everyday lives. However, some congregations are welcoming but not affirming. My participants discussed the negative implications of being outcasted from a group that they initially perceived as supportive. My hope is that these findings encourage future research and organizational change among these religious organizations.

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