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Reconciliation of Religious Beliefs and Minority Sexual Orientation

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RECONCILIATION OF
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND MINORITY SEXUAL ORIENTATION

by

Shawn V. MacDonald
Master of Divinity, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1988

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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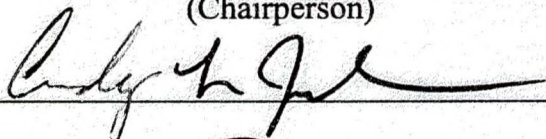
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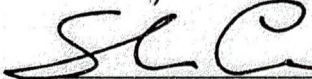
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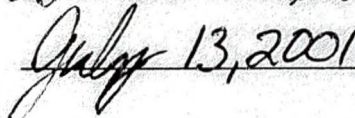


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This project is based in the stories of seven people who were willing to share their personal journeys with me. I was impressed with the wonderful eagerness of these participants to share freely their experiences in order to contribute to further understanding of the subject. They approached the interviews with great thoughtfulness, openness, and care. I hope that the final project presented here gives honor to their personal contributions to the project.

While reading through the stories of others who have accomplished this process of reconciliation, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and would like to give thanks to those who contributed to my journey: my parents were always

committed to raising my brothers and I to respect and appreciate the diversity of others and to know that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are valuable neighbors, teachers, and friends; my Sunday school teachers and youth leaders who always sought above all to stress that God's love for me was unearned and unconditional; Rev. Tom Theriault who taught me to read, study, and love scripture with both my heart and mind; and my professors and mentors from college and seminary, especially Rev. Dr. Duncan Ferguson, Rev. Lorraine Robertson Stewart, and Rev. Dr. James Loder. I am grateful to Bill Sherwood, whose own journey first sparked this question for me and to Rev. Dr. Mel White who in 1983 was the first person I heard suggest that the idea that God did not love gay and lesbian people fully and freely was "bad theology" and that, as he titled his talk, "Bad Theology Kills." I am forever grateful to the courageous women and men who planned and created the 1993 Re-imagining Conference where I was able to put the pieces together for myself and to Rev. Dr. Melanie Morrison who boldly called us all to come out. The dear people of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (now More Light Presbyterians) welcomed me into their safe hold of fellowship when I was frightened and alone. And above all, personal friends Naomi, Jim, Jean, Michael, and others who cannot be named who continually supported and affirmed both my faith and my identity.

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To the students at the University of Minnesota – Crookston
who gave me the opportunity to “practice what I preach”
when they asked me to lead a new group for GLBT students,
and to the new GLBT Student Services Program we were able to create together.

And to all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people,
past, present, and future,
who face the challenge of reconciling their faith and sexual identity.

ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of how gay men and lesbians reconcile conflicts between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation. Christian faith traditions have commonly rejected minority sexual orientations as sinful, while modern social science has identified these sexual orientations as a normal part of the variety of human experience. This study consists of structured interviews with seven participants who have sought to resolve this conflict in different ways, namely through accepting their sexual orientation and adapting their religious beliefs or through accepting their religious beliefs and seeking to change their sexual orientation. The population includes three lesbians and two gay men who are actively involved in religious groups and a man and a woman who have sought to change their sexual orientation for religious reasons (these persons commonly call themselves Ex-Gays). One of the gay men and one lesbian also sought to change their sexual orientation at a time in the past. The interviews also address the motivations that the individuals cite for the choices that they made in reconciling religious beliefs and sexual orientation and their level of satisfaction with their current status in relation to these variables. The interviews are analyzed using a hermeneutic methodology adapted from Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller and Argyris (1989).

An analysis of the interviews indicates that themes related to the rejection of a minority sexual orientation (MSO) include the belief that homosexuality is wrong or sinful, fear of rejection due to having a minority sexual orientation, and severe emotional

distress related to the first two themes. The themes associated with affirmation of a MSO include an awareness of God's love, the experience of an affirmative religious community, and the development of alternative Biblical interpretations relating to homosexuality. The process of reconciliation of religious beliefs and sexual orientation was characterized by a rejection from a religious community, a period of self- and/or spiritual discovery, the experience of acceptance in a Christian community, a sense of emotional healing, and, for those who came to affirm a MSO, a realization that a change of sexual orientation was not possible and a change in religious beliefs. A proposed model for the reconciliation process includes a personal decision to move toward a desired direction, leaving a community of faith or an identity, an experience of grief at what has been lost, creating a new identity, and reconciliation with what has been lost.

The discussion includes implications of this research for the present controversy over the ethics of sexual orientation conversion therapies and implications for counseling.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many persons who realize that they may be gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) face the challenge of resolving conflicts with their family, culture, and religion concerning beliefs about homosexuality (Fortunado, 1982). In the culture of the United States, a Christian perspective greatly influences societal attitudes so that the pervasive anti-homosexual attitudes held in most Christian religious bodies influences the ways many GLB persons understand themselves (Davidson, 2000). This study investigates the ways that Christian GLB reconcile the conflict between their religious tradition and/or religious beliefs and their sexual orientation.

Current religious and political debate surrounding sexual orientation includes the question of whether it is possible for gay and lesbian persons to change their sexual orientation. Although the question of the immutability of sexual orientation has received considerable attention in the past (Cabaj & Stein, 1996; DeCecco & Parker, 1995), there continues to be a lack of empirical research addressing the efficacy of interventions designed to change sexual orientation (American Psychological Association (APA), 1997). Professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association have made clear statements that there is no evidence surrounding the efficacy or possible harm of therapeutic interventions intended to change sexual orientation (APA [American Psychiatric Association] maintains

reparative therapy not effective, 1999; APA, 1997), yet very little is actually known about this phenomena.

The current and recent historical context of many gay and lesbian Christians has been a lack of acceptance or outright condemnation by their religious communities (Clark, Brown, & Hochstein, 1990; Anderson, 1997; Davidson, 2000). "Gay/lesbian individuals within the majority of religious denominations consequently encounter religious as well as social obstacles to the processes of developing self-acceptance and self-esteem" (Clark, et al., 1990, p.267). While moderate Christians may be becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian persons (Hoffman & Miller, 1998), this change does not reverse the pain suffered by many gay and lesbian religious persons. Hostility toward gay and lesbian persons is not limited to Christians. Hunsberger (1996) found similar attitudes among fundamentalists in Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. In my study I will be focusing on persons associated with the Christian tradition as much of the discussion concerning the ability to change sexual orientation is occurring within the Christian tradition (Yeoman, 1999).

Little research has been conducted which seeks to examine the ways that GLB persons reconcile the dissonance between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs (Davidson, 2000). Davidson writes that many authors have noted that the experience of homophobia in society and in religious communities creates great distress for many GLB persons. Reconciliation in this study refers to the process people use to reduce the tension or conflict they may experience between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation. Due to the lack of research on this topic, it is important that research be conducted that describes the various experiences of GLB persons who have

struggled with these issues. Seeking to change from a GLB to heterosexual orientation is one way among others that some GLB persons have sought to deal with the conflict between sexual orientation and religious beliefs. Religious motivation is a major factor in seeking to change sexual orientation (Haldeman, 1996; Khan, 1998). Nicolosi, Byrd, and Potts (2000), researchers who are favorable to conversion therapies, note that many people who seek conversion therapy do so for religious and moral reasons. Other possible options for reconciling religious beliefs and sexual orientation may include developing new religious beliefs, leaving the religious body altogether, or not reconciling the conflict and living with the tension (O'Neill & Ritter, 1992; Davidson, 2000).

Understanding the relationships between various religious beliefs and issues that are the subject of controversy in religious communities, such as homosexuality, is an important aspect of diversity training for therapists (Miller, 1999). Ritter and O'Neill (1989) note that some mental health professionals, by being ignorant of the pain and unique searchings of gay or lesbian clients, may miss the opportunity to provide support and healing. Gay Christians experience a greater sense of anxiety about the exposure of their sexuality, a greater degree of alienation, and a lower degree of self-esteem than non-religious gays (Yip, 1999). This indicates that spirituality and religious topics are important issues to address in counseling GLB persons who hold religious motivations. Additionally, due to the current debates, it is important for counselors and other mental health professionals to understand the phenomena of seeking to change sexual orientation so that they can have more information available when they are dealing with clients who are expressing desires to change their sexual orientation (American Psychological Association, 1997; Davidson, 2000; Sleek, 1997).

Through this study, I hope to further the understanding of the importance of dealing with the losses and joys related to spirituality for gay and lesbian persons (Fortunado, 1982; Nelson, 1982; O'Neill and Ritter, 1992;). It is hoped that this study of persons who have reconciled their faith and sexual orientation in two very different ways will give counseling psychologists a better perspective as to the types of persons who choose one of these two goals and feel they are successful in their efforts to reconcile their conflict through changing their religious beliefs or their sexual orientation.

Literature Review

Historic Approaches to Homosexuality and Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy has a long history of bias against understanding gay and lesbian persons as psychologically whole and healthy (Drescher, 1998; Haldeman, 1994; Murphy, 1992a; Stein, 1996). Sigmund Freud (as cited in Drescher, 1998) described homosexuality as “nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function, produced by a certain arrest of sexual development” (p. 20). Although Freud may be seen as a progressive in his time for removing the moral condemnation of homosexuality in his theory, he understood homosexuality as a disruption of normal development. The focus on psychosexual development in psychoanalytic theory has contributed greatly to the pathologizing of homosexuality and continues to be a foundation for many theorists of reparative or conversion therapies (Nicolosi, 1997).

Tozer and McClanahan (1999) remind us that prior to the 1960's most of the writing in the social sciences concerning homosexuality viewed this behavior as pathological. Although several decades have passed since the American Psychological

Association (1975) and American Psychiatric Association (1973) removed homosexuality from classification as pathological, the American Psychoanalytic Association (1991) has only taken this move in the past decade (Stein, 1996). A group of therapists, National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) (NARTH, 2001) continues to assert the need for therapies to reorient gay and lesbian persons who experience their sexuality as “ego-dystonic” (that the sexual attraction to persons of the same-sex is not compatible with the person’s personality as a whole), even though the diagnostic category of Ego-dystonic Homosexuality was removed by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Tozer and McClanahan, 1999). Silverman (as cited in Tozer & McClanahan, 1999) has emphasized that the idea of ego-dystonic homosexuality is an acceptance of the client’s internalized homophobia and perpetuates the oppression of GLB persons.

Some religiously oriented counselors and therapists have also sought to develop programs for the reorientation of sexual orientation (Court & Whitehead, 1996; Dallas, 1996; Khan, 1998; Yarhouse, 1998). Some of these approaches are based on earlier psychoanalytic theory, while others are based in a religious conversion or healing. The motivation behind these approaches is a belief that homosexuality is not in accord with God’s plan in creation or laws in Scripture (Foster & Bolsinger, 1990).

A complicating issue in any discussion of sexual orientation is the continuum of sexual orientation from an exclusively same-sex orientation to an exclusively opposite-sex orientation (Drescher, 1998; Haldeman, 1994; Murphy, 1992b). While bisexual persons are included in the population of those who seek to reorient their sexual orientation, it is unclear whether these persons achieved any change in their orientation or

chose to identify themselves exclusively with the heterosexual side of their orientation. Although we do not know how many people would fit in this category we might assume that it is proportionate to the number of bisexual persons in society as a whole.

Unfortunately, the lack of research into bisexuality leaves us with little more than guesses as to the number of persons who are bisexual (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). This has been a factor in many of the outcome studies of conversion therapy approaches in that these studies do not contain a pre-assessment for sexual orientation but must rely on recollective self-reports of participants (Haldeman, as cited in Tozer & McClanahan, 1999).

The Conversion Therapies

Therapy to change sexual orientation is referred to as “Reparative,” “Conversion,” “Reorientation,” or “Transformational” by various groups and individuals, although the names for the therapy are quite interchangeable in the literature (Tozer & McClanahan, 1999; Throckmorton, 2000). Nicolosi, Byrd and Potts (2000) state that,

All conversion therapy approaches have in common the goal of attempting to help dissatisfied homosexually oriented people learn to resist and minimize their homosexual behaviors, thoughts, and feelings so that they can live more happily within the mainstream heterosexual culture which they value. (p. 1072)

These therapies are of two basic types or a hybrid of these types (Haldeman, 1994). The first type is a therapeutic approach based in psychoanalytic theory that focuses on various aspects of psychosocial development in childhood. The second type is a religiously oriented therapy relying on spiritual practices such as confession, prayer, and resistance of temptation.

Proponents of conversion therapy have elaborated on Freud's psychosexual development and psychodynamic theory in the claim that "same-sex orientations are an environmentally caused arrest in normal adult development" (Tozer & McClanahan, 1999, p. 724). Nicolosi (1997) is a chief spokesperson for the reparative therapy movement. In his Reparative Therapy of the Male Homosexual, he attributes male homosexuality to a failure of the father-son relationship. Socaridies (as cited in Tozer & McClanahan, 1999) outlines the four major tasks of conversion therapy as, "(a) separating and disidentifying from the preoedipal mother, (b) decoding the manifest perversion, (c) providing insight into the function of erotic experience in homosexual acts, and (d) spoiling the perverse gratification" (p.725-726). Nicolosi and Socarides are founding members of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) which is founded "on the assumption that obligatory homosexuality is treatable" (Drescher, 1998, p. 37).

There are no empirical outcome studies of either of these approaches to therapy, however Throckmorton (2000) has compiled a review of the various surveys of participants in these programs that have been published to date. Two recently published surveys of participants in these therapies contain significant limitations, one of which is the inability of the surveys to demonstrate success rates because they are only surveys of those who have attained some degree of success in these endeavors (Schaeffer, Nottenbaum, Smith, Dech, & Krawczyk, 1999; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000). Interestingly, Schaeffer, et al. found a lower rate of some degree of reported change in sexual orientation among their respondents who used conversion therapy (55.9%) as opposed to those who did not use therapy and relied on other means of support (70.8%).

Unfortunately, the authors do not delineate the forms of support used other than therapy. On further analysis, they divided those who had received therapy into short-term therapy (less than 38 sessions) and long-term therapy (38 or more sessions) groups with the cut-off at the third quartile. In this analysis greater success was shown in the long-term therapy group and concluded that therapy for sexual orientation change may need to be longer term to be more effective. They conclude, however, that "In terms of success, reorientation therapy was not found to be effective" (p. 335). They found that a high degree of religious motivation for change was a significant factor in success toward the goal of sexual orientation change. Nicolosi et al. (2000) found that 20-30% of their respondents shifted their sexual orientation from a homosexual orientation to an exclusively or almost exclusively heterosexual orientation, while 30-40% of their respondents continued to struggle with unwanted homosexual behaviors and thoughts. The average length of time in therapy in the Nicolosi study was 3.4 years. The greatest claim for outcome is by Socarides (as cited in Drescher, 1998) who claims a 35% success rate with his clients, with success defined by Socarides himself and not further defined in the article.

Current professional literature on the religiously motivated type of reorientation therapy is largely found in The Journal of Psychology and Theology (JPT). JPT, published by the Rosemead School of Psychology, focuses on the "integration" of psychology and conservative, evangelical Christianity. Thus, the mission of this journal is to apply psychological findings in the context of a set of religious beliefs as well as to deal with the conflicts that exist between religious beliefs and psychological theory and research. Foster and Bolsinger (1990), reviewing themes in this journal, state that one of

the themes is that “homosexuality is not normal, healthy, behavior” (p. 7). The articles they cite claim Biblical and empirical support for the belief that homosexuality is neither normal nor healthy. Foster and Bolsinger assert that the decision by the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of disorders was a “poor example of how to resolve scientific debates” (p.7). In a review of the Psych-INFO database, JPT is the only journal indexed in Psych-INFO to regularly publish articles in favor of changing sexual orientation since the time that homosexuality was depathologized. Several reviews of these therapies have been published in recent years (Drescher, 1998; Ferguson, 1994; Haldeman, 1994; Murphy, 1992b; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999).

The American Psychological Association (APA) Council of Representatives in 1997 resolved that, “The American Psychological Association supports the dissemination of accurate information about sexual orientation, and mental health, and appropriate interventions in order to counteract bias that is based in ignorance or unfounded beliefs about sexual orientation” (APA, 1997, p.2). This resolution, however, did not address the conflict of religious beliefs and sexual orientation. The resolution also did not ban the practice of reorientation therapies because such therapies, while not having been shown to be effective, also have not been proven to be harmful (Tozer & McClanahan, 1999). Tozer and McClanahan (1999) suggest that future research on the question of the possible harm of these therapies may “solicit individuals who have gone through such treatment and assess their level of satisfaction with this treatment, as well as their perception of harm resulting from the treatment” (p.733).

In this study, I do not seek to examine the efficacy of efforts to change sexual orientations as a whole, but rather to understand the experience of persons who have chosen these and other means to reconcile their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation. Both the Nicolosi, et al. (2000) study and the Schaeffer et al. (1998) study found that religious beliefs were a significant factor in the participants' motivation to pursue a change in their sexual orientation. Throckmorton (1998) asserts that religious motivation to seek sexual orientation change is a significant issue that must be addressed if counselors are to follow through on the ethical mandate to respect the traditions of clients. In reviewing the results of various surveys of sexual orientation conversion programs, Throckmorton (2000) concludes that because some people evidently are able to change their sexual orientation, the practice of conversion therapy should be allowed.

Gay Affirmative Therapies

Gay affirmative therapy is generally recognized as the standard for therapy with lesbians, gay-men, and bisexuals (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000). Affirmative therapy practices can be used consistently with most existing theoretical schools. The ethical codes of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1992) and the American Counseling Association (ACA, 1995) prohibit discrimination against clients on the basis of sexual orientation. The APA recently published guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients, the first of these guidelines is, "Psychologists understand that homosexuality and bisexuality are not indicative of mental illness." (APA, 2000) The Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in Counseling (AGLBIC), a constituent group of the ACA, has developed a set of competencies for working with GLBT clients (AGLBIC, undated). Among these competencies is the

recognition that societal prejudice and discrimination may contribute to the negative attitudes toward their sexual orientation or gender identities held by some of these clients and that “attempts to alter or change sexual orientations or gender identities of GLBT clients may be detrimental or even life-threatening, and further, are not supported by the research and therefore should not be undertaken.”

Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds and Peplau (1991) report both biased and exemplary psychotherapy practices with lesbians and gay men from a study conducted by the Task Force on Bias in Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men of the APA Committee on Gay and Lesbian Concerns. The Task Force identified 17 areas of biased, inadequate, or inappropriate practice, among them, “A therapist believes that homosexuality per se is a form of psychopathology, developmental arrest, or other psychological disorder.” On the other hand, the first of 14 exemplary practices identified by the task force is that, “A therapist understands that homosexuality, in and of itself, is neither a form of psychopathology nor is evidence of psychopathology or developmental arrest, and recognizes that gay men and lesbians can live fulfilling lives.” Liddle (1996) used the list of biased and exemplary practices identified by Garnets, et al., in a study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients. In her study Liddle sought to determine which of these practices contributed to clients rating a therapist as unhelpful and to premature termination in therapy. The practices which participants in the Liddle study indicated were most unhelpful were: “Your therapist suddenly refused to see you any more after you disclosed your sexual orientation;” “Your therapist discounted, argued against, or pushed you to renounce your self-identification as a lesbian or a gay man;” and “Your

therapist indicated that he or she believed that a gay or lesbian identity is bad, sick, or inferior.” (p.397) Liddle concludes that such practices may be harmful to LGB people.

Spirituality in the Gay and Lesbian Experience

Spirituality is an important construct in the psychological well-being of many persons (Barcus, 1999). In this paper spirituality is understood as any desires or attempts of persons to connect with something beyond themselves such as nature, the universe, goodness, their own best self, or a god (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Miller, 1999; Miller & Thoresen, 1999). Religion, on the other hand, refers to the forms that people create around their spiritual experiences, including participation in religious institutions and adherence to particular doctrines. Spirituality is not necessarily religious and religion may or may not fulfill spiritual needs.

While gay and lesbian persons most often face rejection in their religious communities, several authors contend that confronting the experience of oppression and the loss which results from it enable a spiritual deepening for the individual (Clark, Brown, & Hochstein, 1990; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989; Fortunado, 1982). Although in my study I will focus on participants who come from the Christian tradition, spirituality is an important dimension in the development of gay and lesbian persons as a whole and can be understood as a non-religious aspect of each person (Helminak, 1995). In other words, although not all persons chose to practice a certain religion or hold a set of religious beliefs, the experience of spirituality can be understood as a more universal part of the human experience and a focus on the spiritual experience of GLB persons is important to the understanding the experience of all GLB persons.

Spirituality is no less important in the lives of GLB persons than it is in the lives of straight persons (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) have found the integration of one's religious beliefs and their sexual orientation to be helpful in reducing internalized homophobia, which is the dislike or hatred of homosexuality that a GLB person has integrated into their own personality. Thumma (1991) also found this integration to be helpful in a study of a group of gay evangelical Christians. Davidson (2000) notes that research into the phenomenological experience of spirituality by GLB persons is extremely limited and recommends that future research address the process of spiritual coming out. She notes that while the particulars of a spiritual coming out process described by various authors vary with the particular religious tradition, each "begins with oppression and consequent loss familiar to the gay community and ultimately leads to a spiritual deepening" (p.419).

Mahaffy (1996) explored the cognitive dissonance lesbian Christians experienced between their sexual orientation and religious experience and how they resolved it. Her survey asked the question, "Have you experienced any tension between your spiritual beliefs and your sexuality?" (p. 395). She coded these responses as "no tension" for those who reported no tension or skipped the question, as "internal dissonance" if the participant indicated a tension between her sexuality and her beliefs, and "external dissonance" if the participant indicated that the tension was between her sexual orientation and others (e.g., parents, friends, church). The decision to code participants who skipped this question in a particular way contains the possibility of inflating this category. Those who identified themselves as evangelical Christians experienced both internal and external dissonance and the likelihood of experiencing internal dissonance

was greater. Hunter (as cited in Mahaffy, 1996) operationalizes “Evangelical” as “a Protestant who attests to the inerrancy of scripture and the divinity of Christ and either (a) believes that Jesus Christ is the only hope for salvation or (b) has had a religious experience that involved a conversion to Jesus Christ as his (sic) personal savior or (c) both (a) and (b)” (p. 402). Mahaffy’s study included only self-identified lesbians; as a result, women who had responded to dissonance by rejecting a lesbian identity were not included in the sample. This emphasis on personal religious experience is an important factor to consider in working with persons who experience themselves as GLB, because many of the moral and theological beliefs of Evangelical Christians understand this personal religious experience as incompatible with same-sex attraction, desire, or sexual activity.

It is possible that many GLB persons reconcile the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual orientation by either rejecting religious institutions or developing spiritual practices that are independent of rejecting religious institutions (Davidson, 2000). In this study I have chosen to focus on GLB persons who have resolved these conflicts in a way that continues to involve them in a church community in some way.

Religious Orientation and Sexual Orientation

The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations were originally assessed by Allport and continue to be an important distinction in measuring the dynamics of spirituality (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1990; Gorsuch & Miller, 1999). The terms adopted by Allport actually represent concepts that fit within the more general definition of spirituality than that of religion. An intrinsic religious orientation is one in which the motivations for religious activity come from within a person such as a desire

for wholeness or for meaning in life, while an extrinsic religious motivation is one in which the motivations are from outside the person such as family or societal expectations. This leads one to wonder if an extrinsic motivation is involved in the initial choice to seek to change one's same-sex orientation.

Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard (1999) have studied religious orientation and its relationship to attitudes about homosexuality. In their study, they discovered an antipathy toward homosexuals among Fundamentalist participants that was in excess of that required by their ideology. These persons rejected statements about homosexuals that were contradictory to their moral code and statements that were not morally contradictory. The authors attribute this excess of antipathy to prejudice rather than religious orientation. Persons with an intrinsic religious orientation tended to reject homosexual behavior, but not homosexual persons. Their rejection of homosexual behavior appears to be linked to a moral dimension associated with religious teachings and Biblical interpretations.

Oakes (2000) cites various research indicating that an intrinsic religious orientation is correlated with higher self-esteem and positive mental health, while and extrinsic religious motivation is associated with negative views of self and others. Citing William James, Oakes asserts that religiousness or spirituality enables individuals to recognize that they have a mental health problem and to seek to transcend it. If James' theory is applied to the current subject, GLB persons of religious faith should be able to use their faith to attain greater mental health and both self-affirming GLBs and Ex-gays should evidence a positive sense of well-being.

The Conflict of Religious Beliefs and Sexual Orientation

Unfortunately, some GLB persons find themselves involved in an irreconcilable conflict between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs. For many Christians homosexuality is seen as “incompatible with a Christian lifestyle” (United Methodist Church, 1996, p. 394). While many GLB persons integrate their religious beliefs and sexual orientation through adapting their religious understanding, it would seem unethical for psychologists to approach all GLB persons with only this one option, virtually requiring that some clients change their religious perspective.

Tozer and McClanahan (1999), discussing the ethical obligations of psychologists, do not address this one particular conflict between the client’s religious beliefs and the psychologist’s obligation to work against the stigmatizing effects of heterosexism and homophobia. In helping GLB clients to recognize their internalized homophobia in relation to religious beliefs, Tozer and McClanahan (1999) suggest therapists use the following types of questions:

What messages were conveyed from your religious community about same-sex orientations? Do you know any lesbian, gay, or bisexual persons of faith? What was the role of questioning in your faith? Were you encouraged to ask questions, to view any one verse or tenet from multiple perspectives? Or, was such questioning equated with lack of faith. (p.737)

Tozer and McClanahan (1999) further suggest that therapists, “can tell those clients who have heard only that being gay or lesbian precludes a relationship with God, that numerous groups exist to facilitate that very relationship, for example, Dignity (an

organization for GLBT Catholics), or the Metropolitan Community Church” (p.738).

They state that it is important that therapists carefully evaluate the subtle and not so subtle reasons that a client would seek reorientation therapy, however, these authors encourage therapists to resist trying to assist a client in seeking reorientation no matter what the circumstances.

Jenkins (1995) emphasizes the importance of spirituality to the well-being of persons living with AIDS/HIV (PWA/HIV). Despite ambivalence toward organized religion and the rejection many have received from religious bodies, many PWA/HIV retain their ties to churches or a strong spiritual outlook. These persons constitute what Jenkins terms a “loyal opposition” who value spirituality but do not necessarily place it in a denominational framework. Since a large number of PWA/HIV are also gay men, these comments could possibly be generalized appropriately to gay men who are not HIV positive as well.

Summary

Although homosexuality was originally understood in a negative light by psychologists and psychotherapists, currently homosexuality is understood to be a normal variation in the human condition. Some therapists continue to practice conversion therapies to assist people with a MSO to change to heterosexuality, however these approaches are not well supported in the literature and generally rejected by professional psychotherapeutic organizations. The standard of practice which is currently accepted and endorsed by professional associations such as the ACA and the APA is affirmative of gay and lesbian people.

Spirituality is an important aspect of life for many persons, including GLB persons. Unfortunately, many GLB people find their sexual orientation rejected by their religious communities. While several studies have examined the nature of spiritual experience for GLB people, there are no current studies that examine the process used by these people to reconcile conflicts between their sexual orientation and religious beliefs.

Research Questions

In this study I seek to identify the ways that self-affirming, religiously active GLB persons and religiously active persons who consider themselves to be Ex-Gays have sought to reconcile the conflicts between their sexual orientation and religious beliefs.

Through a structured interview, I will seek to:

1. Understand the experience persons may have of dissonance between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs and the ways that they have sought to reconcile these two aspects of their experience.
2. Look specifically at the motivations persons had for seeking to change their sexual orientation, the means they have used to seek to change their sexual orientation, and their relative satisfaction with their results.
3. Look at the motivations of persons who have sought to affirm their sexual orientation and remain religiously active, the means they have utilized to accomplish this state, and their relative satisfaction with the results.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from participants attending two different national conventions during the summer of 2000. The first convention, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Long Beach, CA, is the annual national business meeting for the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA). Many constituent groups of the PCUSA use this event for their annual business meetings, for networking with other groups, for advocacy for their causes, and for public relations. One of these groups, More Light Presbyterians (MLP) (formerly Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns and the More Light Church Network) is the constituent group of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Presbyterians and supporters and is committed to the full inclusion of GLBT persons in the PCUSA. MLP or its predecessor groups has had a presence at the General Assembly each year since 1974 (Anderson, 1997). A second group, OneByOne (OBO), organized in 1995, is “a ministry created to address the needs of those in conflict with their sexuality.” (OneByOne, 2001) OBO is a network of ministries related to Presbyterian churches throughout the United States that focus on helping homosexual persons to change their sexual orientation. The mission of OBO is “To educate and equip the church to minister the transforming grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ to those who are in conflict with their sexuality.” Each of these groups,

MLP and OBO, held several public gatherings during the course of the General Assembly meeting and had booths in the exhibit hall of the convention center. The presence of these two groups brings together self-affirming GLBT persons and ex-gay persons who have a similar religious heritage.

Participants at the General Assembly were recruited through posters on the public bulletin boards (Appendix F), visiting with members of the groups at the exhibit booths, talking with people who had testified at committee hearings, and meeting participants at the events sponsored by these groups. The participants chosen through this manner, then, include those who felt comfortable talking about their experience and had a fair degree of confidence in being able to talk about their experience. The participants do not represent a general or unbiased sample, but more a pool of experts on their own experience, many of whom have previous experience in describing this experience to others.

The second convention, Welcome our Witness 2000 (WOW 2000) in DeKalb, IL, was a first of its kind gathering of the GLBT affirmative ministry groups of nine different mainline Christian denominations (United Church of Canada, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Brethren/Mennonite, American Baptist) (WOW 2000, 2001). Participants at WOW 2000 were recruited through posters on the public bulletin boards, a display on a literature table, and individual contacts.

Participants were asked to fill out a survey for a related quantitative study. At the end of this survey was an invitation to participate in the individual interview that is the basis of this study.

Thirty surveys were distributed at the Presbyterian General Assembly and approximately 25 surveys were distributed at WOW 2000. I received 19 completed surveys from participants at the Presbyterian General Assembly, 12 of whom volunteered to be interviewed. I received 14 completed surveys from WOW 2000 participants, eight of whom volunteered to be interviewed. I also recruited one additional participant through personal contact who was not related to either of these events. Therefore, there were 34 completed responses to the quantitative study and 21 volunteers for the qualitative interview. This represents a 61.8% completion rate for the quantitative surveys and a 61.7% interview volunteer rate from among those responses.

Those who volunteered to be interviewed were assigned a letter (beginning with A) according to the order in which the responses were received. Six persons who volunteered for the interview were excluded from the interview due to having substantial personal relationships with the interviewer. Persons were contacted by phone and e-mail to set up times for a phone interview. The first six interviews (Participants A, B, C, G, J, M) were with the first volunteers who were contacted successfully. This number of participants is commonly viewed as sufficient for phenomenological research methods (Kvale, 1996; Morse, 1998). Participant N was not recruited through the conventions, but through personal contact and a request. He was recruited specifically to add a non-white perspective to the interview pool. Each interview participant was assigned a pseudonym with the initial of his or her participant code. Participants are referred to using these pseudonyms throughout much of the study.

Table 1. Demographic Information on Participants.

Code	Alias	Sex	Age	Current US Geographical Region	Relationship Status	Race Stated	Current Sexual Orientation	Previous Sexual Orientation	Age of Coming Out	Religion Raised	Current Religion
A	Ann	Female	48	South	Partnered	White	Lesbian	Heterosexual	38	PCUSA	UFMCC
B	Bob	Male	44	Northeast	Partnered	White	Gay	N/A	6	PCUSA	PCUSA
C	Curt	Male	37	Central Atlantic	Married	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Gay	15	Baptist	PCUSA
G	Gail	Female	49	South	Partnered	White	Lesbian	Heterosexual	24	Methodist	UFMCC
J	Jennifer	Female	51	Rocky Mountain	Single	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Lesbian	17	ABC	Evangelical
M	Michelle	Female	35	Southwest	Partnered	White	Lesbian	Heterosexual	14	Evangelical	UCC
N	Neil	Male	30	North Central	Single	Black	Gay	Bisexual	6	Pentecostal	PCUSA

Key

PCUSA Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
 UFMCC Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches
 ABC American Baptist Church
 UCC United Church of Christ

There were seven participants in this study. Demographic information about the participants is included in Table 1. This information was in response to the Demographic Form that can be found in Appendix A. There are three male and four female participants who range in age from 30-51 years of age with a mean age of 42 (SD = 8.0). The racial and gender descriptions are as follows: four white or Caucasian women, two white or Caucasian men and one black man. All of the participants had past or current relationships with mainline Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Friends). The participants present a high degree of religious participation and religious education. One participant holds a Master of Divinity degree and is currently a member of the clergy and working fulltime as a pastor in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC or MCC). Another participant was previously a licensed minister in a Pentecostal denomination and studied for licensure in the UFMCC. He also recently held a staff position at a Presbyterian church. Three participants attended Bible college at some point. Curt and Jennifer are staff members of two different ex-gay ministries. The other two participants do not have any formal religious training, however both have a long history of involvement in their churches as officers.

Materials

The instruments used in this study were developed specifically for this study.

Consent Form

The Consent Form (Appendix A) was developed for both the quantitative and qualitative studies and describes the nature of the study and the opportunity to participate

in the interview process. The Consent Form and the research design were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Dakota.

Demographic Form

The Demographic Form found in Appendix B was developed to allow participants freedom to describe their own race, gender, and sexual orientation rather than impose these descriptions upon participants.

Interest Form

The Interest Form (Appendix C) explains the nature of the interview and allows participants to agree to be interviewed and supply contact information.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol (Appendix D) was developed to address the following five areas:

1. The participant's experience of realizing that they might be GLB, their religious orientation at the time, and their initial experience of the relationship between their religious and sexual orientations;
2. Efforts that they made to change or to accept their sexual orientations;
3. The experience they had with programs which were designed to change sexual orientation and the result they experienced from participation in these programs;
4. Their current identification as far as sexual orientation and spiritual orientation and their level of satisfaction or comfort with this state; and
5. A summary of their experience.

Reading Guide

The Reading Guide (Appendix E) was developed to guide the analysis of the interviews. This guide is based on the reading guide developed by Brown, et al.(1989) and reflects a hermeneutical approach to the analysis of the interviews. The Reading Guide is a systematic method of entering the paradoxical hermeneutic circle. “The method involves “building” an interpretation of a whole interview narrative out of its constituent parts.” P. 144

Data Analysis Worksheet

The Data Analysis Worksheet (Appendix F) is a companion piece to the Reading Guide and is also developed from the Brown, et al. (1989) model. This worksheet asks for two types of responses. The open questions ask the rater to identify key aspect of the interview related to the subject at hand. The summary coding questions ask the rater to answer yes or no to general questions about the area being considered. These questions assist in determining the inter-rater reliability. The final section of the worksheet asks for a summary interpretation of the text.

Readers are to read through each interview at least four times, each time with a different purpose. The guide asks the reader to go back and forth between reading the text as a whole and reading for particulars. The first reading is to get a sense of the whole of the text, to read for the story that the participant is telling. Reader is focused on the narrator’s story as he or she presents it: to understand the context, the drama, to listen, “to hear as clearly as possible the narrator’s voice in the story about him/herself.” (Brown et al., 1989; p. 149)

The second, third, and fourth readings involve a two-step process. First, the reader is to mark particular passages in the text that reflect the phenomena being considered in that particular reading. Second, the reader fills in summary worksheets. “The worksheets provide a place for the reader to document relevant pieces of the text and to make observations and interpretive remarks.” P.149

The second reading focuses on the theme of rejection of minority sexual orientation (MSO). The operational definition for this section is “explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to deny or reject his or her MSO. Also include experiences of rejection due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.” (Reading Guide, Appendix D) The third reading focuses on the theme of affirmation of MSO with the operational definition: “explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to accept or affirm his or her MSO. Also include experiences of affirmation due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.” The fourth reading focuses on the process of reconciliation the participant has used to reconcile his or her religious beliefs and sexual orientation. The operational definition for this section is “reconciliation is the process used to reduce tension between religious beliefs and MSO.”

Finally, the summary asks the reader to select a particular passage from the text, an exemplar, which reflects the text as a whole. Having examined particular themes in the narrative, the reader returns to the text as a whole and constructs a summary statement interpreting the overall narrative.

Reliability in this process is determined by the ability of two readers to come to an “Interpretive Agreement.” (Brown et al., 1989) This is determined by: (1) the degree to which both readers underline the same parts of the interview text; (2) the degree to

which both readers agree in their summaries of the narrative; and (3) the degree to which both readers express a similar interpretation of the narrative, specifically with respect to how the themes of interest relate.

Validation is through triangulation. Brown et al. (1989) suggest that at least two readers should read each interview text. Once read, the narratives can be discussed and differences in interpretation can be addressed. There were no substantial differences in the interpretations of the various readers. Differences that are noted have to do with emphasis and the different perspectives of the readers. The first reader's greater background in the area of study would explain the more extensive comments of this reader.

Procedures

Phone interviews were conducted according to the Interview Protocol. The actual interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes with the majority lasting between 45 minutes and an hour. In setting the interviews up, beginning, conducting, and concluding the interviews, the interviewer used an open interviewing style especially regarding participant questions about the nature of the research, the intention of the research, and the research methodology. This open approach was adopted in order to enlist the trust of participants and out of a desire to enlist the participants as co-researchers rather than simply research subjects. Several of the participants were familiar with more traditional quantitative methods of research and were interested in understanding the nature of qualitative research. Some participants asked about hypotheses and research questions, these questions were answered explaining that this form of research is not based in pre-determined hypotheses but rather

seeks to understand a phenomena from the perspective of knowledgeable informants. Most participants asked about the interviewer's interest in the topic and personal history with the topic. Following the formal interview and the conclusion of the tape, the interviewer shared her own story of reconciliation with two of the participants at their request. All participant questions were answered with the full amount of information available at the time.

There was some flexibility used in section two of the protocol in that participants were allowed to choose the order to answer the questions relating to accepting or rejecting sexual orientation according to what made it easiest to tell their story. Participants B, C, G, and J elected to discuss their efforts to accept their sexual orientation first.

The interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. During the process of transcription, specific identifying information was removed from the text. Names of large entities, such as denominations, were left in the text as these seemed essential to understanding the nature of the participant's stories. However, names of smaller organizations such as specific churches, schools, and ministries were removed to protect the anonymity of the participants. The demographic information for each participant as listed in Table 1 was added to each transcript to help the readers in orienting themselves to the particulars of each participant.

Each interview was then analyzed by at least two readers according to the Reading Guide and Data Analysis Worksheet. The primary researcher analyzed all seven transcripts. The transcripts were also read by one of two other readers. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the three readers. All three readers were students in the Master of

Arts in Counseling program at the University of North Dakota at the time of the research.

Table 2. Demographic Information on Readers.

Reader	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Religious Background
1	Female	Lesbian	Presbyterian Church (USA) – Minister
2	Female	Heterosexual	Baptist
3	Female	Heterosexual	Jewish (Conservative congregation)

The secondary readers were trained in the hermeneutical research methodology by the primary reader. The text of Interview G was used as an example for training purposes and was read by all three readers. At the time that the analysis was done, the readers were in three different states and so it was impossible for the readers to meet as a group to discuss their interpretations.

Qualitative Analysis Method

Davidson (2000) recommends that qualitative research be done to explore the religious experiences of GLB persons. Qualitative research is especially suited for exploring the internal experiences of people and phenomenological events (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

The interviews were analyzed using a hermeneutical method. Hermeneutics is “the deliberate and systematic methodology of interpretation” (Tappan, 1997, p. 646) Packer (1985) further defines hermeneutics as “an attempt to describe and study meaningful human phenomena in a careful and detailed manner as free as possible from prior theoretical assumptions, based instead on practical understanding” (p. 1081). This focus on understanding and interpreting the practical understanding is a helpful starting point in this project where there is little research available and it is the understandings of the phenomena which have been developed by the participants themselves which are

under investigation. Hermeneutical approaches are commonly used in literary and theological fields of research for the study of existent texts. In psychological research, the subject of inquiry is the lived text which represents a conversation between the researcher and the participant (Tappan, 1997). Tappan relies on the work of William Dilthey (1833-1911), a philosopher and literary historian, who suggested that hermeneutics is the appropriate theoretical framework for the human and social sciences rather than the forms of inquiry developed in the physical sciences. Dilthey emphasized that humans interpret and reflect on what we do and these processes must be taken into account in the task of understanding the human condition.

Dilthey (1900, as cited in Tappan) suggests that the process of understanding and interpreting lived experience is a hermeneutical circle where the reciprocal relationships between the parts and the whole are continually observed and reinterpreted until a consistent understanding can be derived. This consistent understanding seeks to bring together the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of the experience into a unitive whole. In the hermeneutic circle, the parts of the text are continually reexamined against the whole of the text, the particular dimensions expressed are understood in light of the whole, and the whole is defined and understood by the various parts.

Additionally, Packer and Addison (1989) emphasize that the knower and the known are fundamentally interrelated in the hermeneutical process. Hermeneutical approaches assume that the researcher is part of this hermeneutical circle and that the interpreter's perspective and understanding shapes the interpretation of the phenomenon being observed. This understanding sets hermeneutics apart from more traditional phenomenological methods of interpretation where the researchers strive to recognize and

set aside their presuppositions about the phenomenon under consideration (Polkinghorne, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). In a hermeneutical approach, there is no expectation that the analysis is objective and free of any bias. Rather, presuppositions are stated and the interpreter's perspective is explicitly recognized as an important aspect of the interpretive process. I chose in this study, to also share my perspective with those who participated in the study as interviewees (see above).

Kvale (1996) presents the canons of hermeneutical research as he has adapted them from Radinsky (1970) as follows:

1. The continuous back and forth process between the parts and the whole that follows from the hermeneutical circle...is a spiral which implies the possibility of a continuously deepened understanding of meaning.
2. An interpretation of meaning ends when one has reached a "good Gestalt," an inner unity of the text free of logical contradictions.
3. Part interpretations are tested against the global meaning of the text and possibly against other texts by the same author.
4. To insure the autonomy of the text the text should be understood on the basis of its own frame of reference, by explicating what the text itself states about a theme.
5. Conducting a qualitative research interview requires extensive knowledge of the theme so that the interviewer may be sensitive to nuances of meanings expressed and the different contexts into which the meanings may enter.
6. An interpretation of a text is not presuppositionless. The interviewer cannot "jump outside" the tradition of understanding he or she lives in.

7. Every interpretation involves innovation and creativity—"Every understanding is a better understanding." The interview goes beyond the immediately given and enriches the understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations in the text, extending the meaning (p.48-50, abbreviated).

The analysis presented in this paper will attempt to follow these canons of interpretation.

I further chose to follow the model of a hermeneutical method developed by Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, and Argyris (1989) in their study of moral voice which reflects the methodological perspective I have already described. Their model is particularly appropriate to the present context because they were seeking to understand the interplay of two separate but inter-relating concepts, the voice of justice and the voice of care. In my study I am seeking to understand the interplay of different concepts, religious beliefs and sexual orientation. I found their basic method helpful in teasing apart these two concepts and bringing them together again in the hermeneutical circle. The Reading Guide and the Data Analysis Worksheet used to analyze the interviews, as well as the basic protocol for data analysis, are based upon their earlier model.

Feminist Methodological Position

In this study I approach the task of listening to the stories of the participants with a sensitivity informed by feminist researchers. Olesen (1994) states that the question of voice lies at the foundation of feminist research. Feminist researchers recognize that concerns of how voices of the participants are to be heard and with what authority are central to the task of research. The researcher already mediates participant's accounts as they enter the interview. Fine (cited in Olesen, 1994) urges feminist researchers to make clear how and within what limits voices are used, including making clear distinctions

between the voices of participants and the voices of the researchers. To this end, I approached the task of recruiting participants and explaining the interview and research process openly, stating to potential participants my background, positions, and hopes for the research. In addition to the standard identification of the researcher, that this study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Counseling, I openly stated my sexual orientation and religious affiliation on posters (Appendix G) and in conversations. Additionally, in reporting the results of this research, I have chosen to present each participant as an individual and to rely heavily on the participant's own descriptions of their experience in this introduction recognizing that even these introductions are filtered through my perspective, as I have decided what is important to present from the interviews and what will remain silently locked away in my file drawer

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

In this chapter I will present the results of the analysis of the interviews in four sections. The first section will present the results of the coding questions which serve as a measure of inter-rater reliability. Second, I will introduce the seven participants relying heavily on their own words and explanations of their experiences. Third, I will review the themes that were discovered in the data analysis relating to rejection of sexual orientation, affirmation of sexual orientation, and reconciliation of sexual orientation and religious beliefs. I will also introduce other themes and observations from the interviews. Finally I will summarize this chapter by relating these findings to the original research questions.

Reader Agreement

The summary coding question reveal a high rate of agreement overall. The first and second reader had 100% agreement on the summary coding questions. The first and the third reader had agreement rate of 92.9%. The one question where there was disagreement in rating reads: "Does the narrative describe a change (or attempt to change) sexual orientation in order to accomplish reconciliation?" The disagreement was on the two participants, Michelle and Neil, who had participated in a sexual orientation change program at a previous time, but came to affirm their orientation. The first reader answered these questions "Yes" and circled "attempt," while the second reader answered

“No.” I believe this represents a case where the question did not anticipate the situations that these two participants present rather than a failure to agree on an interpretation of the narratives.

The first reader underlined more extensively than the other two readers on all seven narratives. A review of the items underlined by readers two and three revealed that the first reader generally marked these items as well. This difference most likely reflects the greater knowledge of the field of inquiry represented by the primary reader and a greater ability to detect the subtleties represented in the interviews.

Participant Introductions

Ann

Ann was raised in a Presbyterian home, the oldest of eight children. She describes an experience of realizing God’s love for her at the age of four and a half by identifying herself in a Sunday School teaching picture:

“And these old teaching pictures there that they had and there was one there of Jesus and the children I can distinctly remember looking at that picture, and there was already no room enough in my parent’s, my mom’s lap for me, with four of us, there wasn’t um, that picture had Jesus holding two younger kids and then there was the older sister standing to one side, I identified, and that was the literal stage according to Fowler¹, at that four and a half year old age, I identified with

¹ The participant here is referring to the work of James Fowler (1981) in which he develops a model for faith development parallel to the models for intellectual, psychological and moral development by Piaget, Erickson, and Kohlberg. The stages presented by Fowler are Stage 0 – Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith; Stage 1 – Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood); Stage 2 – Mythic-Literal Faith (School Years); Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence); Stage 4 – Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood); Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith (Mid-life and Beyond); and Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith.

that. But I also read body language. And the way the artist had painted it, there was direct eye contact with a silent "I love you" that I read right then."

This fundamental understanding of God's love for her becomes a foundation for future experiences. Her position as a member of the church was very important to her especially at age twelve when she was confirmed.

Ann's first awareness that she might be lesbian came from outside of her. She was accused of being "queer" by a friend in high school and says, "I didn't know what queer was but I was sure I wasn't going to be it because she didn't like it. So, um, from there I went deep into the closet." She went on to get married, have two children and struggle with a call to the ministry. She was in her thirties when she was able to pursue her call to ministry and enter seminary. Although she did not see herself as a lesbian and was married and the mother of two, members of the committee which oversaw her application for candidacy for ordination evidently suspected that she was a lesbian.

"So, um then when I started seminary, um I started having problems with my Presbytery committee and they wouldn't tell me what the problem was, it was so horrible and terrible and bad that I could never be ordained, as a Presbyterian.... And I sort of emotionally limped along with that for about two and a half years while I was in seminary um, and then one of the members of the committee happened to slip up and mention the name of the person at which point I knew that being lesbian was the issue that person had with me."

It was this experience that caused her to see that the church teaching she had accepted, that being gay or lesbian was a choice, was not actually what was practiced in the church. She had not chosen to be lesbian, but was treated as a lesbian nonetheless,

and was being blocked in pursuing her calling to the ministry. As a result of this she found an affirmative therapist, left the Presbyterian ordination process, and eventually found an outlet for her calling to ministry in the UFMCC.

Bob

Bob also grew up in a religious family and recalls the Presbyterian church in which he grew up as a safe place and very important to him socially and intellectually. He describes his image of God in this way: "And I was um and so God was, was very much a was not a dominator kind of God, growing up for me God was a safe person, a being spiritual being and um, and I think some of the attributes of God I actually attribute to my Grand mother, my paternal Grandmother." This was a God with whom he could talk about anything, including issues of his sexuality.

Bob identified himself as being gay at an early age, first talking about it with God at age 12 or 13. He was not able to explore his sexuality in his small rural town while he was still in high school so he threw himself into other endeavors:

"So growing up though, you know, junior high and high school, I just focus on music and academics and politics all that and the best little boy in the world. Part of the tradition is that you don't really get in trouble because you aren't really doing what kids usually do because you're so clamped down because you don't know how, there are no opportunities no way to."

He chose to attend a college in an urban city where he knew that there were other gay people. It was during his college years that he attended an MCC congregation and began to study the Bible texts that address homosexuality. He also attended the Presbyterian General Assembly and met another young man who was gay from another state. In this

experience he was able to see that he was not alone, that there were other gay people in the church.

Following college Bob was able to move to a community where he joined a church that was affirmative of his sexual orientation. He was able to tell his story in the congregation and come out before the Presbytery and find affirmation. He found support particularly among older straight women. He found these relationships to be a helpful corrective to the tendency he finds among gay men to separate from women and straight society. Bob has held many leadership roles in his congregation including ordination as an elder and a deacon. He feels that his gifts are affirmed and his participation in his congregation has been instrumental in this process.

“I think primarily because I can integrate my sexuality and my spirituality and my sense of vocation. I mean I can exercise my gifts. It’s my calling, God’s calling to me has been affirmed by my faith community and I don’t think it gets much better than that.”

Curt

Curt grew up in a Baptist church. As he entered puberty he began to recognize that the sexual feelings he had were toward men and he also understood that the church saw this as wrong. In addition to negative messages from his church, Curt also had the experience of being identified by others at school as different and being bullied.

“And it was very sad for me and I was very depressed about it. I think the experience I had faced when I was younger was that I was beat up and made fun of a lot and so I was, and people would call me fag and sissy and all of those things, and so the reason I think that I was sad about that is that I already had

experienced a lot of rejection because they thought that I was gay so if I totally admit that I was gay then that basically was a license to be rejected. And you know, since I, so I think that definitely, that would mean that I was really out of the norm and that I would be an odd person.”

Curt states that this resulted in him becoming isolated from other people and lonely. When he realized that he wasn't growing out of his homosexual feelings he was depressed and had suicidal thoughts. His only source of comfort and acceptance was in his relationship with God. “God was the only one that was the most accepting and even though I wasn't sure about how he felt about this part of my life, the sexual part of my life. Um for some reason I felt like I could still pursue him and I found meaning in that, there is a certain amount of satisfaction.”

As a young adult Curt was invited to be in a one-on-one discipling relationship by the Youth Pastor at his church. He describes this relationship and several that followed it as being instrumental in healing his emotional problems.

“But he was basically like a father figure to me. Um, he loved me and cared for me in a way that no other guy ever had before, and he accepted me, he knew my weaknesses and my faults and he knew that I wasn't good in sports and all of those things that I thought that I needed to be in order to be a man. Um, he was showing that it was ok that I wasn't even though he was kind of a jock and kind of into all of the guy stuff he didn't care if I wasn't and he accepted me as I was and that was very significant for me.”

As a result of these relationships, healing emotionally, and becoming more comfortable with himself, Curt states that his sexual desires gradually changed over a ten-

year period. Curt now identifies himself as heterosexual, is married and has two children. He now works in an ex-gay ministry doing one-to-one counseling with other men who are trying to change their sexual orientation.

Gail

Gail realized that she was lesbian in her mid-twenties when she met her first girlfriend. She describes this as a positive experience, "Oh, when I came out I thought it was great I was surprised that I hadn't figured it out earlier I guess." She was raised in a church-going Methodist family. Soon after she came out, Gail had the opportunity to help in the founding of an MCC congregation in her town.

"I do know that at the time that I came out ah somebody came up to me and suggested something about starting an MCC and I said well what is that because I had never heard of it. And they said well that is a gay and lesbian church and blah, blah, blah. And I said well that sounds like a wonderful idea how do you do something like that and so I contacted the district that I was in and they said well this is how you do it and so we did it."

Gail continues to be actively involved in this congregation to this day and says that when she misses church on Sunday she doesn't feel that her week is complete. Gail states that she never felt disconnected from God, the church never rejected her, and she has always had a strong sense of God's love. "I felt that God made me this way and if God made me this way it was because it was planned and you know as they say God doesn't make any junk. So I figured that if that was the case then it was ok with God so therefore it was going to be ok with me."

Jennifer grew up overseas, the daughter of Baptist missionaries. She first realized that she was lesbian when she was attending a boarding high school. She had her first lover while a student at this school. Although she knew that this relationship was unacceptable at the school, she says, "In some ways I wasn't unhappy with how it felt, but I suffered a lot of guilt."

After high school, Jennifer came to the United States for college. Her college career was interrupted with periods of attending a Bible school and what she describes as a "yogic phase." During her third try at college she says, "I actually got involved with somebody and actually and just sort of leaped into the lifestyle as a lifestyle started doing the bar scene just started accepting that that's kind of who I was." For her this period included, heavy drinking, drug use, and "sex for sex's sake." She then became involved with a New Age religious group which didn't see homosexuality as acceptable and she put her energies into this religious organization rather than being sexually active.

When she did enter another relationship with a woman, she was "ex-communicated" from the New Age religious organization. Not long after this, she began attending an ex-gay ministry at a Christian church. She was accepted there even though she was not Christian at the time and found that they were more open to hearing the full scope of her experience.

"Really, probably for the first time really had somebody that was willing to hear both sides of what was going on with me. They were willing to hear that, yeah, you've had relationships with women and, yeah, they've probably were not what God had in mind and, yeah, you probably really did learn something from them."

Through her involvement with this ministry, Jennifer came to believe that the underlying reasons for her sexual orientation were unmet childhood needs which led to the desire to be emotionally dependent and enmeshed with women.

Jennifer has been participating in the ministry for fifteen years and is now a staff member. She does not see her process as complete, but she describes her current state this way:

“But what’s neat about where I am now in my sexuality is that I can really be with women in a much more free way because I am not needing them in a desperate way. I also have access to men because part of me internally I think has grown up enough emotionally to relate to this other kind of person. Because women are same and men are other and I think it’s a bigger leap you might say to relate to something other than you than to relate to something the same as you. So to be able to actually have room in my heart and in my mind and in my life for these other creatures called men is really neat.”

Participation in the ministry has also brought her back to Christianity. She now has a sense of peace that she never was able to achieve in the New Age organization in which she was involved. She found acceptance both from the people in the ex-gay ministry and from God.

Michelle

Michelle first started to recognize that she had attractions toward other women when she was fourteen. She tried to find information about her sexual orientation at that time, but found that, “There wasn’t much it was pretty slim pickins.” She was a born again Christian and attended an evangelical congregation. The conflict of her religious

beliefs and her sexual orientation was what she describes as “an internal civil war.” “I became separate from myself, that if I was to be a Christian and love the Lord and be part of the body of Christ that that in fact meant that I could not be gay, lesbian, could not identify with my sexual orientation.”

- Michelle sought to deal with this conflict by attending a Bible college where she was immersed in Christian community and Bible study. Following Bible school she went to live with a friend’s family and developed a relationship with her friend’s brother.

“And you have got to remember, or understand, that in the evangelical community at the time when people were dealing with sexuality issues such as homosexuality, graduation, getting married was graduation. It was all part of that continuum. So I went as far as being in a relationship with a guy, consider marriage, you know the whole nine yards, and then and that was probably my final attempt to change and so that is how I dealt with it in terms of changing.”

However when she shared her struggles with homosexuality with her pastor she experienced rejection. She was no longer allowed to take communion at her church. Her sister, with whom she had always been very close also rejected her. At that point she was depressed and suicidal. She felt that she could only choose between accepting that she was gay and leaving the church or killing herself.

“I think that’s where the whole suicide came up for me is that I knew that my relationship with the church couldn’t be there for me or again my relationship with my family. And what I was faced with, what I was left with, and I had to make a choice whether I was going to die or whether I was going to live.”

Although she was able to accept her sexual orientation, she was left with a spiritual emptiness. She visited an MCC church but did not find the segregation from the rest of the Christian community to be satisfying. Eventually she was able to find a new spiritual home in the United Church of Christ in an affirming congregation. In order to get to this point she had to come to a new theological understanding and a new way of understanding the Bible.

Neil

Neil traces his awareness of being attracted to men back to the age of four and says that he had a crush on his best friend when he was ten. He was raised with a “very strict religious upbringing” in the black Pentecostal tradition. Neil describes his conflict this way:

“Threw my life in an uproar. I fought and I battled for many, many, many, many years. I cried, I prayed, I knew I was wrong, I just knew that something was wrong, I knew that my life was. I just knew that God. I knew that God loved me, which was a lot different from many of the gays that I have counseled with in that you know they all thought that God hated them. I knew that God loved me and um, I just knew that my sin was sin.”

Neil also had a strong desire to serve God in the ministry and knew that he could not be gay and serve in the ministry. He entered the ministry in his Pentecostal denomination under what he calls “false pretenses” and at times had to preach against homosexuality.

When he felt that he was no longer growing spiritually as he wanted, Neil shared with a friend his struggles with homosexuality. The friend shared this with the pastor of

the church and Neil lost his job and was forced to go to counseling to change his sexual orientation with a counselor who was also a member of the church. When Neil realized that he could not pursue this direction of changing his sexual orientation, he went through a period where he thought he was losing his mind.

“I lived in the dorms, I didn’t leave my room, I didn’t go to classes, I would have my food brought to me from the cafeteria because I would say that I was sick, I didn’t leave my room. I don’t know, because I was afraid of what was out there, I was afraid of people finding out that I was gay, and of people who had seen me as a spiritual leader within the church would see me as a hypocrite, that I would cause someone to stumble. I had the weight of the world on my shoulders.

Because my mom and dad, my mom always said that it is such a great sin for us to cause someone else to sin.”

Neil was then able to find a group of gay Christians who were involved in forming an MCC church. He met gay pastors and counselors who affirmed that he was OK. He was able to see God at work in the MCC congregation and to feel the presence of God’s Spirit in their worship.

“And he [God] can’t see this church and he can’t see our efforts and to walk into the house of God and to be met by his presence and to be able to feel the Spirit of God in a gay church was a turning point for me. I still struggled and I still had battles but at that point I knew that God loved me and I knew that even if God wasn’t completely happy, he was going to accept me, if that was, maybe my life wasn’t in God’s perfect will but it was in God’s permissive will.”

After several years, Neil began to study for licensure as an MCC minister and in

this process studied the Bible passages that had been used to condemn him from an affirming perspective and that they were very different than his former understandings. Through this church and his work there, Neil was able to find a peace and comfort that he had been missing. He came to a new appreciation of God's love for him.

Themes Identified in the Interview Texts

Themes Relating to Rejection or Denial of Sexual Orientation

Rejection of sexual orientation was defined in the Reading Guide as, "explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to deny or reject his or her minority sexual orientation (MSO). (Also include experiences of rejection due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.)" (Reading Guide, Appendix E). The raw analysis of data under this theme is presented in Table 3. Here I will present and discuss the common themes identified under this topic.

Belief that Homosexuality Is Wrong or Sinful

One of the most prevalent issues identified by participants as important to their rejection of their MSO is a belief that homosexuality is wrong, sinful, or condemned by God. The intensity of this belief seems to be tied to the life choices that participants made in dealing with their sexual orientation. Those who identify very clear beliefs that homosexuality is wrong (Curt, Jennifer, Michelle, and Neil) are the participants who have taken measures to try to change their sexual orientation. The participants who had a more vague sense that it was wrong, Ann and Bob, were able to move through this belief to a position of self-acceptance.

One participant, Gail, does not identify a belief that homosexuality is wrong. At

Table 3. Data Analysis on the Theme of Rejection of Sexual Orientation.

Second Reading – What key aspects contribute to the rejection of MSO in this narrative according to the participant?

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) Reader 3 (G, J, M, N)	Common Themes
A	Denial of MSO, motivation not wanting to loose friends. Church teaching that being gay is a choice. Marriage: not wanting to divorce and fear of loosing children.	Early experiences with church insisting that sexual orientation was a choice.	Church teaching that MSO is a choice
B	Denial or caution in dealing with MSO. Mother's understanding of God was central to her rejection, also aware of family scuttlebutt about a gay uncle. The church didn't talk about sex, aware of Biblical texts. Threw himself into academic and music activities.	Seems to have accepted himself at a very early age, possibly due to religious views he had been taught and the unconditional love of Grandmother. Accepted self at puberty and was able to talk to God about it.	Views of God as loving rather than rejecting
C	Afraid of being odd, history of being teased for being a sissy. Belief that MSO is wrong, that it would interfere with relationship with God. Afraid to talk about feelings with anybody, it would mean that something was seriously wrong. Depressed and suicidal due to knowing that he was gay, feeling that he could not do anything about it but remain celibate.	Non-acceptance within society and religion (early) Experience of being bullied. Felt isolated, helpless. Feels homosexuality is wrong currently according to his religious beliefs. Assumes homosexuality is unhealthy and changeable.	Being bullied. MSO is wrong. Afraid to talk with anyone, isolated. Helpless, depressed, suicidal. Homosexuality is unhealthy or seriously wrong.
G	No rejection of own MSO. Was not rejected by church or family.	There seem to be none – she has not rejected her sexual orientation, rather she is generally satisfied with her orientation and religious experience.	No rejection

Table 3 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) Reader 3 (G, J, M, N)	Common Themes
J	<p>She has a clear belief that homosexuality is wrong. A New Age religion she participated in also viewed homosexuality as wrong. She was excommunicated due to participating in a relationship with a woman. Understands female-female relationships as “merging” or enmeshed, due to unmet childhood needs or fear of men. Saw gay community as defiant and only able to see MSO in black-and-white terms.</p>	<p>Her involvement with both the New Age organization and the ex-gay ministry, as well as her soul searching and insights into her unmet needs and underlying reasons for choosing women as partners, which led her to being more open to and available to men.</p>	<p>New Age organization. Belief that homosexuality is wrong. Understands homosexuality as relating to unmet childhood needs.</p>
M	<p>Lack of information. Belief that she could not be both gay and Christian resulting in depression and thoughts of suicide. Belief that God was condemning her to hell. Rejection by church – unable to take communion. Rejection by family – unable to see nieces and nephews. Participation in Bible school and an ex-gay ministry in an attempt to change.</p>	<p>Her struggle with her religion that condemned her MSO. Her sense of unfulfillment, incompleteness without her religion, church, and community in her life. Her belief that she had to choose between being a lesbian and her religion.</p>	<p>Belief that she had to choose between being gay or Christian. Felt condemned due to MSO. Rejection by church leads to loss of a sense of fulfillment.</p>
N	<p>Belief that being gay is wrong and would lead to hell. Fear of rejection from family, friends, church, and God. Loss of dream of a heterosexual family and vision of success. Even with self acceptance churches are still judgmental and fear of being rejected continues.</p>	<p>It seems that this man did not want to face the disappointment and disapproval of his parents, church, community, and God. He attempted to change his MSO through prayer and fasting, he kept his secret from his family and church for sometime. He felt that being gay was a sin, that it was wrong, that he would be condemned by his church.</p>	<p>Being gay is wrong/sin and leads to condemnation. Fear of rejection by family, friends, and church.</p>

one point she states that she is not bothered by other people's ideologies. Gail is the only participant who did not reject her sexual orientation at any point and the only participant who did not need to reconcile her sexual orientation and religious beliefs. This was her case despite being an active participant in a denomination, the United Methodist Church, which has a position that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

(UMC, 1996) Gail evidently did not feel a great affect from this teaching, relying more strongly on her understanding of God's love and acceptance. "So I figured that if that was the case then it was ok with God so therefore it was going to be ok with me."

Ann and Bob both discuss the understanding they had from their religious communities that homosexuality was not accepted. Ann talks about the church teaching that homosexuality is a choice and that she did not intend to make that choice as a result. It was when she sought ordination as a minister in her denomination that she discovered that she was being held back by the assumption of committee members that she was lesbian, that she realized the fallacy of this position. She was being treated as lesbian whether or not she accepted that within herself. This caused her to realize that sexual orientation is not a choice but a more essential characteristic and she was then able to rely on her more foundational belief in the unconditional love of God for all people to accept her sexual orientation. Bob vaguely knew that sexuality was something that he could not talk about in church, however he always felt safe and free to talk with God about his sexuality. For Ann, Bob, and Gail, a foundational belief in God's unconditional love seems to be an important mediating factor in how they dealt with church teaching.

Curt and Jennifer articulate strong beliefs that homosexuality is wrong or sinful. They each state this belief in clear and unequivocal terms. Both cite this belief as a

motivating factor in their desire to change from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation.

Michelle and Neil were raised to believe that homosexuality was wrong or sinful. Both of these participants tried to conform to this belief by changing their sexual orientation through prayer and other acts of devotion. For both of these participants, the inability to achieve this desired change in their sexual orientation led to severe emotional distress: Michelle states that she was depressed and suicidal and Neil entered a period when he was afraid to associate with other people and would not leave his room. They relate their inability to live up to the expectations of their churches' teachings directly to this emotional distress.

Fear of Rejection Due to Sexual Orientation

The second theme identified in the interviews as a reason for rejecting or denying one's sexual orientation is the fear of rejection by family, friends, society, or church. This theme was identified to some extent by six of the seven participants. The one participant, Gail, who did not identify this as an issue actually identified its absence in her experience. Gail stated that she had never been rejected by her family or church for being lesbian.

Curt experienced rejection early. He recalls being bullied and teased for being a "sissy" or a "fag" when he was a child and adolescent and did not want to actually be gay because he did not want to be an "odd person." He states that he was isolated and unable to make friends due to this treatment. Curt ties this early experience to his feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts. Neil was also afraid of being identified as gay by his classmates, however he was able to take a different approach. Neil made sure that he

always had a girlfriend so that he wouldn't be thought of as gay and became "Mr. Popular" in both high school and college.

The fear of rejection by church and religious communities was well founded for several participants. Ann found her path blocked in the ordination process due to suspicions that she was lesbian and needed to leave her denomination and find a new church in which she could fulfill her calling. Jennifer was "excommunicated" from the New Age religious organization she participated in due to her participation in a relationship with a woman. When Michelle's pastor found out that she was struggling with homosexual feelings, she was no longer allowed to take communion in the church. Neil lost his position as a Youth Minister in the church and was sent to counseling to change his sexual orientation so that he could remain a member of the church. Curt was never rejected from the church due to his sexual orientation, however his fear of rejection was one reason that he never talked with anyone about the issues with which he was dealing.

Rejection by family or fear of rejection by family is also a dominant issue. Ann resisted accepting the reality of her sexual orientation because she did not want to get a divorce and she was afraid of losing her children. Bob states that his mother was unable to accept his sexual orientation due to her religious beliefs and her understanding of God. Michelle's family, especially her sister rejected her. Michelle was not allowed to have contact with her nieces and nephews due to her sexual orientation. Neil was very afraid of the disapproval of his family and continues to not be out to his family. Curt and Jennifer did not talk specifically about family issues in this context.

One participant, Neil, describes an experience of having his sexual orientation rejected in counseling. Neil's pastor sent Neil to a counselor who was a member of his congregation. Neil says that the counselor talked to him during these visits and he had little opportunity to talk. The counselor's explanations for Neil's sexual orientation included that he had a "homosexual arrest in an infantile state" or that he had a demon that needed to be exorcized. Neil chose not to pursue this counseling relationship after about six sessions.

Belief that Homosexuality Is Unhealthy

The other reason for rejection of sexual orientation that was identified was only identified by Curt and Jennifer. These two participants described homosexuality as unhealthy or due to deficits. Jennifer describes homosexuality as relating to unmet childhood needs. Curt sees homosexuality as related to deep emotional needs and previous abuse. Both participants talk about homosexuality as the inability to form intimate relationships with persons of the opposite sex.

Severe Emotional Distress

Another theme related to rejection that merits attention is severe emotional distress in the form of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Curt and Michelle felt that they were close to suicide at certain points in their journey. Curt describes himself as depressed and suicidal when he realized that there was nothing that he could do about his sexual orientation. For Curt, his process of sexual orientation change was tied closely with the relief of these feelings. Michelle was at the point of deciding whether to live or die when she had tried to change her sexual orientation and had failed. Neil did not ever see suicide as an option, however his fear and anxiety in realizing the reality of his sexual

orientation led to a period of intense emotional struggle which he describes as “loosing my mind.” One participant, Curt, resolved his distress due to conflict with his sexual orientation by repressing his sexual orientation. The other two participants resolved their distress by accepting their sexual orientation, which, at the time, they saw as a last resort.

Themes Related to Affirmation of Sexual Orientation

Affirmation of sexual orientation is defined in the Reading Guide as, “Explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to accept or affirm his or her MSO. (Also include experiences of affirmation due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.)” (Appendix E) The raw data analysis for this theme is presented in Table 4.

Awareness of God’s Love

The most pervasive theme identified which related to participant’s ability to affirm their sexual orientation is an awareness of God’s love. All five of the participants who have reconciled their sexual orientation and religious beliefs through affirmation of their sexual orientation identified their belief in God’s love for them as gay men or lesbians as a key issue. Ann was able to rely on her early experiences of God’s love and needed to separate her experience of God’s love from the negative teachings of her denomination. Gail states that she was always confident of her acceptance by God. Bob and Gail both have an understanding of God’s unconditional love that seems to have buffered them from the negative teachings of the church. Michelle and Neil both needed to find ways to discover or rediscover God’s love for them as a lesbian and a gay man in order to come to a place of self-affirmation.

Curt and Jennifer also speak of God’s love for them, however they also talk about the need they feel to live within what they believe to be God’s standards. Their

Table 4. Data Analysis on the Theme of Affirmation of Sexual Orientation.

Third reading – What key aspects contribute to the affirmation of MSO in this narrative according to the participant?

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) J, M, N)	Reader 3 (G, Common Themes
A	<p>Struggle in the ordination candidacy process. Realization that SO is not simply a matter of choice. Belief in God's love for who she is and that the church is wrong. Therapy, coming-out group, dreams. Needed to leave Presbyterian church entirely. Anger at church, grief process. Religion had to change, learned to question.</p>	<p>Neutral therapist who understood being homosexual was due to much more than making a choice not to. Knowledge of God's love. Saw the church's double-standard.</p>	<p>Affirmative/neutral therapist God's love Saw "double standard" in the church</p>
B	<p>The church is a welcoming or safe space. Strong sense of God's unconditional love. Seeking out gay community and dating. Meeting other gay Christians as a youth delegate and at MCC. Bible study, learning alternate interpretations of scripture. Affirmative church community, straight supporters, spiritual family giving unconditional love. Coming out in church, regional church body (presbytery), and professionally.</p>	<p>Grandmother's love View of God's love View of his purpose/direction</p>	<p>God's unconditional love Sense of direction/affirmation (related to affirmative church)</p>
C	<p>No examples of affirmation.</p>	<p>Affirmation of MSO decreases due to personal childhood experience and belief that homosexuality is wrong in God's view.</p>	<p>No affirmation</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) Reader 3 (G, J, M, N)	Common Themes
G	<p>Recognition of who she is, "that was the way I was meant to be...this is the way God made me. Not bothered by other people's ideologies. A strong internal sense of what is right.</p>	<p>She was never kicked out of church for being a lesbian, she is convinced that God made her this way for a reason, that God accepts her and this makes it easier for here to accept herself. Furthermore, she is part of a religious organization (MCC), surrounded by supporters.</p>	Belief that MSO is created by God
J	<p>Involvement with the gay community and lesbian partners involved drinking, drugs, pornography, getting more lusty and sex for sex alone. Ex-gay ministry included unconditional love and acceptance with the premise that same-sex activity is wrong.</p>	<p>Her openness to experimentation, her involvement with a woman that helped her address and fulfill her childhood needs.</p>	Experimentation in Gay community
M	<p>Had no other place to turn – die or accept being gay. Involvement in gay community. Some participation in MCC, a small group Bible study, and personal Bible reading.</p>	<p>Having come to the conclusion and realization that she could not change her sexual orientation despite Bible College, having a relationship with the opposite sex, having attended an ex-gay ministry and conference, having worn out her options to attempt to change, she had decided to live with the other side of the equation – to live as a lesbian woman. She dissociated herself from the church that condemned her. A key aspect was her decision to live rather than commit suicide.</p>	<p>Affirmation was the last chance, she had to choose between life and death. Affirmative church</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) Reader 3 (G, J, M, N)	Common Themes
N	<p>Knowledge of God's love for him.</p> <p>Meeting other gay Christians, MCC, gay pastors and counselors.</p> <p>In MCC able to go to the house of God and know that God loves him.</p> <p>Seeing God at work in a gay church.</p> <p>Learning new interpretations of scripture.</p> <p>Church also involved in racial justice issues – felt support in both areas of discrimination.</p>	<p>He found support and a sense of family, of belonging, from the gay Christian community. He took an active leadership role in this community and believed his mission was to help other struggling gay Christians.</p> <p>His beliefs about God and religion changed, he accepted God as loving and found it less of a struggle to accept his MSO.</p>	<p>Gay Christians</p> <p>Affirmative Church</p> <p>Sense of God's love</p> <p>Support for race issues</p>

awareness of God's love increased as they were able to move beyond their homosexual feelings and live within what they believe to be God's will. Curt explains his relationship with God as wanting to live in conformity with God's plans for him. "I want to agree with him because I realize that I love God and I realize that what he has planned for mankind is good and I'm really drawn to that now and so my beliefs change now as a result of my relationship with him not because I have to but because I want to, if that makes sense." For Jennifer, the acceptance she found in Christianity was a welcome relief after the efforts she had expended in her New Age religious experience:

"For probably oh close to twenty years if you count my phasing into it and my phasing out of it and at a certain point it was like you know I have been working my brains out here and my, trying to fulfill my karma and dharma and all of that stuff and it's like how come I don't feel at peace. So you know finally I came back to Christ who says Come to me if you want to be saved and I said you know I don't know if you can really do this, but I've run out of options, so I'm going to leap."

Jennifer found God's presence and peace at the other end of that leap. However, Jennifer's experience of God's love also excludes any same-sex relationships. "I am able even to relate even to relate to God because if God is like whatever things impacted us when we were kids well he can be quite an ogre sometimes or strict or legalistic or whatever you know, although I do believe that he has a structure which we call his laws, I feel, I mean I am much more in touch with his heart now."

Affirming Religious Communities

All of the participants who have taken the path of self-affirmation have found that participation in affirming Christian churches has been important to their own process of affirmation. All five of the self-affirming participants have participated in congregations of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) at some point in their journey to self-acceptance. Two of these participants, Bob and Michelle, went on to find their faith community in mainline protestant churches that have adopted a welcoming stance to GLBT people. Participants noted the importance of an affirming spiritual community and the reassurance of God's presence in the worship of a gay church as particularly important.

The participation in MCC congregations seems to be particularly notable. Gail and Neil each helped to found MCC congregations in their home communities soon after coming to accept that they were lesbian and gay. They not only sought an accepting Christian community, but forged a new one. Neil found a double acceptance in MCC due to the explicit programs for racial justice in the denomination. He was affirmed in both of the areas where he feels discrimination in society, race and sexual orientation. Ann decided to pursue her call to ministry in the MCC denomination after her attempt to pursue this call in her home denomination was thwarted. Ann describes her participation in MCC as broadening her experience of the Christian community and her appreciation for ecumenism. This is because members of MCC come from all varieties of Christian denominations. Bob participated in an MCC congregation while he was in college. For him it was one of the first times that he met other gay Christians. Michelle tried an MCC congregation but did not find that it met her needs for Christian fellowship, "I did get

involved with an MCC very briefly, however it didn't feel right to me because it seemed like segregation to me and I felt it was a major pick-up scene."

Michelle and Bob found their experiences of affirming Christian community in mainline Protestant churches. Michelle, having worked out a new, affirming theology on her own, found a community of others with similar beliefs in the United Church of Christ (UCC),

"I went from a very literal interpretation of the Bible and very traditional values to understanding the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law, from black and white to freedom, from conservative theology to liberation theology, and so yeah it changed and interestingly I didn't have word for any of it and it wasn't until I came into the United Church of Christ in 1997 that I could put words to some of the things that I had worked out within myself."

Bob became involved in an affirming Presbyterian church soon after college. He found support and affirmation in this congregation.

The spiritual community offered in these affirming congregations was identified as important by participants. Bob found that having an affirming "spiritual family" was very important for him and very healing. Within his church, Bob found support especially among older straight women, which was helpful in counteracting the separatism he often finds in the gay community. Michelle speaks of a longing for participation in Christian community before she found the UCC. Ann needed to find a Christian community where she could share her gifts for ministry and found it in the MCC. Gail has always found participation in church to be an important part of her life. She says, "If I don't go on Sunday I don't feel like my week is complete." Neil describes

his participation in the MCC congregation he helped to form as helpful. In addition to associating with other gay Christians, he was able to experience God's presence in worship in a gay congregation.

"God even in this, if this were a sin God could not be in this. He couldn't look on it. If God can't look on sin then he can't see me. And he can't see this church and he can't see our efforts and to walk into the house of God and to be met by his presence and to be able to feel the Spirit of God in a gay church was a turning point for me."

Alternative Biblical Interpretations

A third factor that contributed to self-affirmation was learning new interpretations of Biblical passages. Bob participated in a Bible study in the MCC congregation he attended. Although he had always believed that God loved and accepted him, he says that he "compartmentalized" his understanding of scripture, which he saw as condemning of his sexual orientation. The Bible study allowed him to overcome that compartmentalization. Neil found his study of the scriptures in preparation for ministry in the MCC to be very important. He feels as though he had been indoctrinated with false interpretations by his early church experience. Ann and Michelle both make extensive use of scripture in telling their personal stories. Michelle says that she had to move from a literal interpretation of scripture to understanding the spirit of the law.

Counseling or Therapy

Only one participant, Ann, used therapy to come to a place of self-acceptance. She found that she needed to find a trustworthy therapist and spent six months in individual therapy before she was able to come to a place where she was able to actually

say that she was lesbian. Part of this process for her was attending a coming-out group for women.

Affirmation as Experimentation

In contrast to those who chose to affirm their sexual orientation in the end, Jennifer sees her earlier attempts to accept her sexual orientation as unhealthy times in her and devastating. This time included drinking, doing drugs, becoming more “lusty,” and using pornography in sexual activity. She sees it as a time when she cuts loose sexually.

Reconciliation of Sexual Orientation and Religious Beliefs

In this section I will discuss the significant events and ingredients of the reconciliation process that were identified in the transcripts. Reconciliation was defined as, “The process used to reduce tension between religious beliefs and MSO.” (Reading Guide, Appendix E) The raw data analysis for this theme is presented in Table 5. I will begin with those who accomplished the process of reconciliation by affirming their sexual orientation and adapting their religious beliefs and then address the issues of those who sought to change their sexual orientation. Although the results vary, both groups demonstrate a process of reconciliation. It is important to note that one participant, Gail, did not appear to have a significant conflict between her religious beliefs and her sexual orientation and thus has a very subtle reconciliation process. She never felt that her religious beliefs were in conflict with her sexual orientation and was able to integrate her religious practice and her lesbian identity in the MCC congregation which she was instrumental in establishing.

Table 5. Data Analysis on the theme of Reconciliation of Religious Beliefs and Sexual Orientation.

Fourth Reading – What are the significant aspects of the reconciliation process?			
Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) (G, J, M, N)	Reader 3	Common Themes
A	<p>Struggle with candidacy committee led to the realization that SO is not a choice.</p> <p>Fundamental belief in God's love rooted in childhood faith.</p> <p>Therapy, coming-out group, dreams, change in denomination.</p> <p>Return to PC to speak of experience, protest brought closure.</p> <p>Speaking the truth and being willing to accept it.</p>	<p>The participant seemed to come to the conclusion of a difference in personal spirituality and religious beliefs (teaching within the church).</p> <p>Dreams and sense of unconscious at work, describes a-ha moments.</p>	<p>Belief that SO is not a choice</p> <p>Reliance on God's love</p> <p>Dreams</p>
B	<p>Sense of church as a safe place or a potentially safe space.</p> <p>God as safe, loving, always present.</p> <p>Participation in MCC and Bible study on homosexuality, meeting gay Presbyterians.</p> <p>Affirmative church, spiritual family, support of straight women and men.</p> <p>Coming out in church and presbytery.</p> <p>Integrating spirituality and sexuality, reducing compartmentalization.</p> <p>Affirmation of gifts and calling.</p>	<p>Participant refers to expanding spirituality but never talks of change within himself to fit society.</p> <p>Sees honesty as very important.</p>	<p>Honest and integrity</p>
C	<p>Significant relationships with heterosexual men, experience of acceptance and emotional intimacy.</p> <p>Healing of emotional issues (depression and anxiety) through these relationships.</p> <p>Homosexual desires began to change as a by-product.</p> <p>Now feels comfortable with himself and closer to God.</p> <p>Change from feeling free to not believe in something to wanting to agree with God.</p>	<p>Felt unaccepted by everyone accept God, even though God was unapproving of sexual part of life.</p> <p>Supportive male attention allowed him to reconcile to heterosexuality.</p> <p>Focus not on being able to overcome desires but on "working on the details in your heart."</p> <p>Very happy now with view of God and comfortable with relationship to God.</p>	<p>Emotionally intimate relationships with heterosexual men.</p> <p>Healing emotional issues.</p> <p>Change necessary to feel comfortable with self and closer to God.</p>

Table 5 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) (G, J, M, N)	Reader 3	Common Themes
G	<p>Transition from Methodist upbringing to starting an MCC church.</p> <p>Lack of conflict attributed to belief that being lesbian is OK with God.</p>	<p>There seems to be no (and no need for) reconciliation between this woman's sexual orientation and religion – she believes that God made her the way she is, not that God or her church condemns her.</p>		<p>No reconciliation process.</p> <p>Strong belief in God's Acceptance</p>
J	<p>The Bible has a clear stand against homosexuality, New Age organization also against homosexuality.</p> <p>Entry into ex-gay ministry based in acceptance and unconditional love – a big key.</p> <p>Re-parenting to meet unmet childhood needs and reduce the need to be enmeshed with women.</p> <p>Change of religious beliefs to Christianity and trust in God, a sense of peace, no longer view God as strict and legalistic.</p> <p>Allowing God to touch deep places.</p> <p>Now – not particularly looking for a relationship with a man, considering remaining single and devoting life to service to God.</p>	<p>Her involvement with an ex-gay ministry is very significant. The ministry did not condemn her past experiences with women but helped her understand her reasons for choosing women, helped her become more open to men, and really helped her become more loving of God, more capable of "soaking in God's grace." Her experiences of getting closer to God and more open to men paralleled each other.</p>		<p>Acceptance and unconditional love in ex-gay ministry.</p> <p>Fulfilling unmet childhood needs through re-parenting.</p> <p>Increased sense of peace with God.</p>
M	<p>Dissociated herself from the church.</p> <p>Personal Bible reading – Psalms of separation.</p> <p>After accepting MSO, still had a deep longing for God.</p> <p>Found a UCC church.</p> <p>Change in religious beliefs: understanding of scripture: literal → spirit of the law, black-and-white → freedom, conservative theology → liberation theology</p>	<p>Embracing the gay community and her sexual orientation while searching for and ultimately finding a way to be active spiritually, a way to interpret the Bible and its laws differently – not having to choose her orientation over God or vice versa. Rather, understanding that she can have both.</p> <p>Realizing that her efforts to change her MSO have and will fail, that she cannot change.</p>		<p>Learning new Biblical interpretations.</p> <p>Realization that she cannot change.</p>

Table 5 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2 (A, B, C) Reader 3 (G, J, M, N)	Common Themes
N	<p>Tried to changes through appearing straight, always having a girlfriend.</p> <p>Prayer and fasting asking God for change.</p> <p>Entering the ministry under false pretenses and having to at times preach against himself and homosexuality.</p> <p>Being outed and loosing ministry job was central to change.</p> <p>Struggle included a period of several weeks when he was afraid to leave his room.</p> <p>Finding gay Christians and starting an MCC church, seeing the spirit of God at work in a gay church was evidence of God's acceptance.</p> <p>New understanding of the scriptures.</p> <p>Found peace, comfort, family, and belonging.</p> <p>Still not entirely comfortable, struggle continues to this day.</p>	<p>Coming to accept that he could not change his sexual orientation and at the same time examining scriptures more closely and realizing that God was loving, not hateful, that Jesus was kind to all regardless of who they are and what they did.</p> <p>This man surrounded himself with gay Christians and held a positive view of homosexuality and God.</p> <p>He came to understand that he could love and serve a God who loved and accepted him.</p>	<p>Awareness of God's love</p> <p>Affirmative Christian Community</p> <p>New understandings of Biblical texts.</p>

Rejection from a Religious Community

A key transition point for several participants was the experience of rejection from their church communities. Ann, Michelle, and Neil were forced to confront the conflict between their sexuality and religious beliefs when they experienced explicit rejection due to their sexual orientations. Ann and Neil had been denying their sexual orientations. Ann was keeping it out of her conscious awareness. Neil was keeping his secret to himself and felt that he was living under false pretenses. Michelle and Neil both describe prayer and intense involvement with Christian communities as ways that they sought to change their sexual orientations. For all three of these participants, it was the crisis of having their sexual orientation discovered and being rejected by their faith communities which led them to begin the process of acceptance of their sexual orientation. Neil and Michelle had tried to change their sexual orientation and found that they could not. The rejection by the church then forced them to the only other alternative they saw apart from suicide, to accept their sexual orientation and find a way to live with it. Ann had made a semi-conscious decision to not choose to be lesbian when she was still in high school. This seemed to be working for her until the suspicion that she might be lesbian led to a roadblock in her pursuit of ordained ministry. She saw that pastors and pastoral counselors on her committee must not believe that sexual orientation is a choice due to their actions toward her. From this she felt that the church teaching she had accepted was a lie. Jennifer also experienced rejection that she describes as being "ex-communicated" from her New Age organization due to her involvement with a woman. This experience was a turning point that brought her to participate in a Christian ex-gay ministry.

Realization that Change Was Not Possible

Several of the participants describe coming to the realization that they could not change their sexual orientation. Ann describes coming to the realization that being lesbian is not a choice. From this realization she moved toward accepting herself as lesbian following twenty years of denial of this aspect of herself. Michelle had tried to change her sexual orientation through attending Bible college, participating in an ex-gay ministry, and developing an intimate relationship with a man. Even with all of these measures, she eventually came to the conclusion that she had no option but to accept that she was lesbian. At that time in her life, this realization also meant that there was no acceptance for her in the church. Neil put great effort into changing his sexual orientation as well before he realized that he could not change. Neil states that he lost a great deal of weight due to the effort he put into fasting while praying for God to change his sexual orientation. He also investigated ex-gay ministries, but did not feel that he would have the money to attend these conferences and programs. Like Michelle, it was only after exhausting these options that Neil turned toward accepting his sexual orientation.

Other participants never sought to change or deny their sexual orientation. Bob and Gail both saw their sexual orientation as part of who they were from early on. These participants also seem to have had the easiest time reconciling their religious beliefs and sexual orientation.

A Period of Self-Discovery and/or Spiritual Discovery.

The participants describe a period of self-discovery and spiritual discovery. This period includes Bible reading and developing new interpretations of the Bible, prayer,

and in one case a series of dreams. Ann, Bob, Neil, and Michelle all speak of time they spent in personal prayer and Bible study as instrumental in their process of self-acceptance. Within this process the understanding of God as accepting and a source of unconditional love described above is also central. Jennifer and Curt also describe a personal journey of self-discovery in their efforts to change their sexual orientation. They worked to heal deep emotional wounds and found that they needed to be honest with themselves and with God about these wounds.

Change in Religious Beliefs

The central themes in the changes in religious beliefs described by the participants are developing new interpretations of Biblical passages and focusing their faith on a belief in God's love and acceptance of all people. Ann and Bob were able to develop new understandings of the Bible within their existing, non-literal ways of interpreting the Bible. Michelle, on the other hand, needed to move away from a literal style of Biblical interpretation and focus on "the spirit of the law." Neil seems to have sought new understandings of scripture while staying within a conservative Biblical hermeneutic²³. All of these participants describe a move toward focusing their faith on a loving and accepting God. For Ann and Bob, this is congruent with the faith they have known since childhood. Michelle and Neil needed to develop a deeper or different appreciation of God's love for them. The faith they had been raised in had a greater focus on living according to God's laws or standards in order to be in relationship with God.

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³ Throughout the interview Neil uses scripture passages in a way that I would describe as literal. This is different from some of the other participants who use scripture in more metaphorical and symbolic styles.

Acceptance in a Christian Community

All of the participants who affirmed their sexual orientation sought out a Christian community that affirmed their sexual orientation. Michelle's process was delayed in the period when she was unable to find a Christian community that met her needs. Neil had such a community when he lived in another community, but does not have an affirming Christian community where he currently lives and notes this loss. The affirmative Christian community provides social support, affirms the personal spiritual journey of these participants, and nourishes their spiritual journey.

The participants who accomplished a reconciliation of their religious beliefs and sexual orientation through changing their sexual orientation describe this process as including acceptance in the ex-gay ministry or by affirming others, a healing of deep emotional wounds, conforming to God's standards, and increased sense of comfort or peace in relationship with God. Neither of these participants ever sought to affirm their sexual orientation within their faith tradition; they both describe a consistent belief that homosexuality is wrong and the only acceptable expression of sexuality is within heterosexual marriage.

The experience of acceptance is a key ingredient highlighted by both of these participants. Curt found acceptance within relationships with a series of heterosexual men. Although Curt did not raise his own struggles with his sexual orientation with these men, he states that their acceptance of him despite his social awkwardness at the time was important to his own growth. In these close male relationships he feels that the other men modeled to him a healthy male sexuality. Jennifer found acceptance in the ex-gay ministry she participated in which she hadn't found anywhere else. A significant feature

of this acceptance for Jennifer was that people in the ex-gay ministry were able to see the positive in the experiences she had with women. The other significant feature is that she felt accepted in the Christian ex-gay ministry even though she was not Christian at the time and while she was still practicing her New Age religion.

Emotional Healing

The participants who have achieved reconciliation through changing their sexual orientation, Jennifer and Curt, see their homosexual feelings as related to deep emotional wounds. Jennifer describes her desire to be in intimate relationships with women as related to unmet needs she had from childhood. In order to fulfill these needs she entered into a "Re-parenting" relationship with another woman in the ex-gay ministry, which she describes as including a sexual component. Curt states that he needed to heal his emotional issues that contributed to depression and suicidal ideation. One of the men with whom he had an intimate, nonsexual relationship was also a counselor. In this relationship he was able to work through the issues related to his depression. As he began to heal emotionally he states that his same-sex sexual desires began to decrease as a by-product of this other healing work.

The faith stance described by Curt and Jennifer is one focused on living in accordance with their understanding of God's standards. They each describe themselves as moving toward a desire to live their lives in God's will. Curt states,

"I've noticed in my relationship with God the result is that I've wanted to, I want to agree with him because I realize that I love God and I realize that what he has planned for mankind is good and I'm really drawn to that now and so my beliefs

change now as a result of my relationship with him not because I have to but because I want to, if that makes sense.”

The end result of their efforts to change their sexual orientation for both Curt and Jennifer is a deeper sense of closeness with God and a sense of personal peace. Both participants describe their relationship with God as becoming more rewarding and deeper through this process. They also both describe themselves as becoming more comfortable with themselves.

Although these participants describe acceptance in the ex-gay ministry as important, they also noted that ex-gay people are still misunderstood and shunned by many Christian churches and they longed for more support for themselves and the participants in their ministries.

Other Themes

The Experience of Loss

Loss is evident in many of the themes listed above. Participants described losing connections with family, being rejected from churches, and feeling excluded from the love of God due to their sexual orientations. Two participants described the experience of having their sense of call to ministry denied due to sexual orientation. All of these experiences are experiences of loss.

In addition to the experiences listed above, participants also described losses in their ability to experience intimate personal relationships. Jennifer is currently pondering the possibility of remaining single and celibate continually. Neil describes a longing for a relationship where he could live out his goal of being a father. Curt states that when he

earlier thought that he could not change his sexual orientation, he believed that being gay would be that he would have to settle for a life of celibacy.

Several participants described a grieving process as part of their process of coming to self-acceptance. Ann and Michelle both stated that the experience of grief was central. Ann describes coming to a point of closure in this process when she returned to the denomination of her birth and was arrested in an act of civil disobedience. Michelle used the Psalms to meditate on her feelings of loss and separation. Bob and Michelle talk about the affirming churches they have found as places of healing from the losses of the past.

Identity Integrity or Change

The participants who chose to affirm their identity as lesbians or gay men speak of authenticity, honesty, and wholeness. They understand themselves as becoming more fully who they really are in the process of acceptance. Their process of reconciliation with religious communities is an affirmation of this identity and brings a further sense of wholeness. Ann, Bob, and Michelle describe their lives as integrated rather than compartmentalized. Finally, their sense of affirmation by God gives their lives meaning.

The participants who chose to reject a gay or lesbian identity, on the other hand, enter into a process of extensive identity reconstruction resulting in a sense of being more comfortable with who they are. Curt describes his process as taking ten years and Jennifer has been working in her process for fifteen years now. In contrast to the self-affirming gay and lesbian participants who talk about accepting their true selves, the ex-gay participants have endeavored to change their identities in order to have a greater sense of integrity, find affirmation in their religious communities, and feel accepted and

loved by God. These participants also describe a religious experience and closeness to God which gives their life meaning, however for the ex-gay participants it is conditioned by their identity change.

Both groups sought to establish an identity which was consistent with their beliefs and fulfilling, however they have accomplished this task in very different ways. Both groups express a significant level of satisfaction with the end result of their efforts toward wholeness. Only Neil expressed ambivalence about his current sexual identity. Those who moved toward self-affirmation of their sexual orientation define their process as moving to a greater integrity by becoming more of their true selves, while those who sought a change in sexual orientation feel fulfilled in becoming more aligned with the expectations they understand God to have for them.

Early Religious Experiences

Several of the participants, Ann, Bob, Gail, and Neil, described early experiences of having a sense of love and acceptance from God. For these participants, this personal religious experience is a foundation that they have returned to in their reconciliation processes. Although each of these participants found that their churches taught that homosexuality was unacceptable, they were each able to put their own foundational experience of God as loving and unconditionally accepting ahead of the teachings of their church.

All of the participants were raised in religious traditions which were not accepting of homosexual behavior. However, there was a difference in the way the participants were able to reconcile their sexual orientation and religious beliefs when compared to the churches in which they were raised. Ann, Bob, and Gail were raised in churches with

moderate theological positions, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Curt, Jennifer, Michelle, and Neil were raised in churches from more conservative theological traditions, Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal. These churches tend to adopt a literal Biblical hermeneutic (Lovinger, 1990). It is interesting that the participants who were able to accept their sexual orientation more directly were raised in mainline protestant churches and the participants who actively tried to change their sexual orientations were raised in more conservative theological traditions.

Summary and Exemplar Statements

In the process of data analysis, readers were asked to briefly summarize the reconciliation process used by the participants and to select one passage from the interview which is representative of this process. The results of these processes are presented in Table 6 and Appendix H. The ability to arrive at a consistent and consensual interpretation of the text is important to the validity of the hermeneutical process. The summary statements appear to contain consistent meaning with some different emphases in interpretation. The exemplars selected by the readers are generally different portions of the text, however these are still consistent with the overall summary statements presented. The exemplar statements themselves give a poignant summary of the experiences of participants.

The readers were able to agree on at least one key summary theme for each participant. For the first participant, Ann, the readers cited her belief that God's love is for all people. In summarizing Bob's journey both readers identify his journey toward integrity and purposefulness in his faith. Curt's journey is characterized by the emotionally intimate relationships with men that he used to change his sexual orientation.

Table 6. Data Analysis on Summary Statements

Summary – Summarize the process of reconciliation of religious beliefs and sexual orientation in this narrative.

	Reader 1	Reader 2	Reader 3
A	Early denial of MSO based on the belief that one was only gay if you chose it. When rejected by committee for ordination due to suspected MSO, she realized that it was not a choice and affirmed minority sexual orientation by leaving PC. Found new church, MCC, in which she could serve as a minister and share the message that "God's love is for all people."	The participant seemed to conclude that God loves all equally and has created us all as He wants us to be.	
B	Awareness of sexual orientation is always rooted in a profound sense of God's presence and love. Reconciliation is with Biblical understandings and participating in an affirming church. Spiritual family is central to reconciliation of sexuality and spirituality.	This person has very firm, secure attitudes toward himself. He seems to feel he has a purpose or direction with his faith concerning his sexual orientation.	
C	Early rejection of MSO is based in not wanting to be different and a history of being teased. Became lonely, depressed, isolated and suicidal. Emotional problems healed through several emotionally intimate relationships with heterosexual men, "modeled healthy male sexuality." Sexual desires changed as a "by-product" of emotional healing.	This participant utilized male support to, most likely, arrive at his desired orientation. His whole attitude changed and he clings very tightly to the idea that homosexuality is wrong/not normal in the eyes of God. (This is a typical attitude of Baptists). Focuses a lot on others and intellectualizes.	
G	This participant does not have a tension between MSO and religious beliefs. She makes a transition from finding her spiritual community in the Methodist church to being a founding member of an MCC church.		This woman felt no need to reconcile her religious beliefs and sexual orientation – she is very active in her MCC and seems to have accepted her sexual orientation.

Table 6 (Continued)

	Reader 1	Reader 2	Reader 3
J	<p>This participant had a broad religious pilgrimage but a consistent belief that homosexual activity is morally wrong.</p> <p>She experienced lesbian relationships as enmeshed and unhealthy.</p> <p>Reconciliation includes work on unmet childhood needs and development of a new relationship with God based in unconditional love. She has been involved in this process for fifteen years and sees it as a work in progress.</p>		<p>The process of reconciliation took a great deal of time, self-exploration, and self-understanding and was aided largely by the high level of involvement in the ex-gay ministry and its groups, which did not condemn this woman's past experiences with women but helped her explore them.</p> <p>The process seems to be ongoing – she seems satisfied with her current religious experience and her openness to men and women, though she expects to change, to move to a better place.</p>
M	<p>The participant first tried to surround herself with her religious community in an attempt to change MSO and used an ex-gay ministry. This led to depression and suicidal thoughts as well as rejection by the church. She first accepted her MSO yet continued to have a "deep longing for God." In time her theology changed when she found an affirmative church community (UCC).</p>		<p>This woman concluded after much effort to change her MSO and wanting to feel complete – to be active spiritually and religiously – that she did not have to maintain her "internal civil war." That she could be lesbian while embracing God, fulfilling two of her needs (to be herself and to have religion in her life.)</p> <p>She changed her beliefs, interpreting the Bible and its laws more liberally; she freed herself from the condemning, traditional church, and had a parallel experience of embracing the gay community and her own MSO.</p>
N	<p>Reconciliation was precipitated by outing and rejection.</p> <p>In an MCC he found God's presence in the midst of gay people and rediscovered the loving side of God.</p> <p>Continues to have some struggle and desires to have a family.</p>		<p>This man took an active leadership role in a church that supported rather than condemned his sexual orientation and changed his concept of God in the process.</p> <p>He was able to serve God and to understand that God was loving and accepting, though he desires a closer relationship with God now. Believing that God was loving, believing that he could not change his orientation, he came to terms with his orientation.</p>

All of the readers found no tension in Gail's experience but note that her experience in the MCC church has been significant to her development. The common themes identified in Jennifer's story are her broad religious experience and the length of time she has devoted to her process of change (fifteen years). The readers agree that Michelle first put great effort into trying to change her sexual orientation but found that this led to deeper depression. Her journey to self-affirmation and reconciliation is characterized by a change in religious beliefs. In reading Neil's interview the readers agreed that his experience of God in an affirming congregation and a renewed belief in a loving God are central to his process of reconciliation.

Themes Related to Research Questions

Question 1

The first area of inquiry listed in the research questions is to "Understand the experience persons may have of dissonance between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs and the ways that they have sought to reconcile these two aspects of their experience." From the themes identified above, it is clear that the experience of this conflict was profound for many of the participants. Themes identified in this area include a belief from their religious communities that homosexuality is wrong or sinful, a fear that they will be rejected by the church, their families, and society for their sexual orientation, and experiences of severe emotional distress.

The conflicts these participants experienced were usually quite significant and resolution of the conflict required them to make important changes in their lives. Some participants changed churches or denominations. Two participants helped to form new churches. Two participants describe significant impacts on their careers due to their

sexual orientation. The participants who have sought to change their sexual orientation have spent ten and fifteen years in this process and now work in sexual orientation change ministries for their careers.

Question 2

The second research area is to “Look specifically at the motivations persons had for seeking to change their sexual orientation, the means they have used to seek to change their sexual orientation, and their relative satisfaction with their results.” Four of the participants in the study actively engaged in efforts to change their sexual orientation. Two of these participants, Curt and Jennifer, feel that they are successful in these in endeavors and are relatively pleased with their results. Two other participants, Michelle and Neil, were not successful in these efforts and found that their attempts to change their sexual orientation served to fuel the internal conflict they experienced.

The motivations for seeking to change their sexual orientation were first a belief that being gay or lesbian was wrong or sinful, and second a fear of rejection by their family, church, and/or society. One participant, Jennifer, also describes her period of participating in lesbian relationships as a time of overall experimentation in drinking, drugs, and sex. I find it interesting that none of the participants described their minority sexual orientation as being “ego-dystonic.” Rather than refer to internal, ego-related sources of conflict, the conflict they describe is with external figures such as God, family, church, and society.

The means for changing sexual orientation vary somewhat between the participants. Two participants made use of sexual orientation change ministries. One sought counseling. And the other participant describes a series of intimate, non-sexual,

same-gender relationships. The two participants who have been successful in their efforts to reconcile their religious beliefs and sexual orientation through changing their sexual orientation describe two common features in their experiences. The first of these features is participating in intimate same-gender relationships in order to heal past emotional pain and learn to relate within their own gender. For one participant these relationships were completely non-sexual, while the other describes her experiences as having some form of a sexual component. The second feature is a spiritual journey characterized by giving up character flaws and learning to forgive others for past abuse or neglect. These two participants also described these features as characteristics of the ministries they now lead. Additionally, there was a difference between those who were successful and those who were unsuccessful in their sense of being accepted in sexual orientation change ministries or therapy. The participants who have been successful in this process describe acceptance in the ministry programs as a key feature, while those who found the process unhelpful also felt more judged that accepted in the change program or therapy they attempted.

The results of the efforts to change sexual orientation are mixed. The two participants who tried this path and were not successful found that their experience was harmful. Both of them describe serious negative psychological symptoms from suicidal ideations for Michelle to what may be defined as paranoia for Neil. On the other hand, the participants who have found success on this path describe themselves as much happier with who they are now and much more satisfied with their spiritual lives.

The participants who feel they have been successful in changing their sexual orientations describe themselves as satisfied with their sexual orientation as it now

stands. However, their descriptions of their current sexuality are still not typical of most heterosexuals. Curt states that he, like many other ex-gay men that he knows, is only attracted to his wife and does not experience more general attraction to women or men. Jennifer says that men are “starting to look pretty good” but she has yet to establish a significant relationship with a man and, as stated above, is currently considering celibacy as a spiritual calling.

Question 3

The third area of inquiry is to “Look at the motivations of persons who have sought to affirm their sexual orientation and remain religiously active, the means they have utilized to accomplish this state, and their relative satisfaction with the results.” Five of the participants have sought to reconcile their sexual orientation and religious beliefs through affirming their sexual orientation. The motivations that they cite vary. For several of the participants this direction reflects a move toward identity integrity, accepting and being who they truly are. The participants describe a foundational spiritual awareness that they are loved by God. This foundational awareness is not shaken by their experiences of church teachings that homosexuality is unacceptable. The two participants who first tried to change their sexual orientations, describe affirmation of their sexual orientation as originally being a last resort. Michelle saw herself at a decision between accepting herself as lesbian or suicide and says that she came to self-affirmation as lesbian reluctantly.

The themes identified by these participants as helpful in their process toward reconciliation are quite consistent throughout this group. They describe a profound awareness of God’s love, an experience of an affirmative Christian community, and the

discovery of alternative Biblical interpretations related to homosexuality. Four of these participants are very satisfied with the results of their process. One participant, Neil, is moderately satisfied with the current state of his sexual orientation and spiritual or religious experience.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

I initially began the study with great respect for the efforts of those who have sought to change their sexual orientation and expecting that in the study I would find some indication of who is able to succeed in these efforts. I continue to have respect for the efforts these people have put into their personal work to change their sexual orientation. However, I was surprised at the length of time and amount of energy that seems to be required to accomplish the task and the limited results that the people I interviewed shared either for themselves or others. The participants cautioned that it is a long and difficult process that requires dedication from those who attempt it. Surprisingly the participants who have worked so hard to change their sexual orientations still felt that they received limited support from the church as a whole. They described a continuing misunderstanding of their situation by Christians in general. The acceptance promised by Christian communities for conforming to heterosexual norms appears to be lacking from the reports of these participants. This leads me to ponder whether the continuing stigma experienced by ex-gays in their religious communities is evidence that the views of persons in their religious communities about sexual orientation are based more strongly in prejudice than in religious doctrine.

I did not seek out persons who had tried sexual reorientation programs and failed in these attempts, however in my sample I found two such persons. Both of these people

described a difficult task of realizing that they could not succeed at changing their sexual orientation. For one this process included a severe depression with contemplation of suicide; the other person describes serious psychological turmoil and the fear of a psychotic break. This supports the assertion by professional organizations such as the ACA, APA, and American Psychiatric Association that sexual reorientation therapies are not without risks and further demonstrates that it is those people who find that they are not able to accomplish the task who are likely to be most vulnerable to these risks (APA, 2000; AGLBIC, undated).

On the other hand, it is those who had affirmative religious beliefs and affirmative faith communities who had the easiest time accepting their sexual orientation. From this limited sample of interviews, it seems that affirming one's sexual orientation and finding ways to adapt one's religious beliefs to this affirmation is a more direct way to deal with this conflict.

The change in religious beliefs described by those who came to affirm their sexual orientation is generally not very great. They describe two important aspects, one is a reinterpretation of the Biblical passages that have historically been used to condemn homosexuality; the other is a renewed focus on God's love of all people as a central tenet of their religious beliefs. Some participants described a greater change in how they view scripture as a whole, however Neil was able to continue to hold a conservative stance in interpreting scripture and adopt new interpretations of these passages. The focus of God's love that was described by participants is compatible with all variations of the Christian faith with which I am familiar and also with many other major religions.

Participants seem to have used this emphasis on God's love and acceptance to affirm themselves in the face of rejection or discrimination from family or society in general.

Ethics of Conversion Therapies

This study is informative in the current discussions over the ethics of the practice of conversion therapies. One issue raised by this study is the appropriate response of counselors to persons who seek help in changing their sexual orientation.

The risks of conversion therapies are treated differently in the literature according to the position of the author of the paper. Throckmorton (1998, 2000) sees little risk in the studies of conversion therapy he reviews, stating that such counseling is not intrinsically harmful (1998). Nicolosi, et al. (2000) found that 7.1% of the 882 respondents to their study were doing worse as the result of conversion therapies. They state, "Conversion therapies may be psychologically harmful for some people, which is of course true of all forms of psychotherapy." (p.1084) Unfortunately, the sampling method used by Nicolosi, et al., makes it unlikely those who were dissatisfied with their experience in conversion therapy were surveyed adequately. Surveys were distributed through therapists providing conversion therapy and at conferences of ex-gay ministries. A method which would seem to disproportionately represent those who are satisfied with their experience in seeking to change their sexual orientation. Schreier (1998) in response to Throckmorton notes that there is evidence that lesbians and gay men find the approaches advocated by conversion therapists to be harmful using Liddle (1996) and Garnets, et al. (1991) as evidence. Herek (2000) maintains that the attitudes toward homosexuality represented in these therapies are correlated with and possibly contribute

to sexual prejudice in society. He defines sexual prejudice as “negative attitudes toward an individual because of his or her sexual orientation” (p. 19).

This leads to questions of how, when, and whether counselors should work with clients to change their religious beliefs. Counselors are called to respect and affirm the religious traditions of their clients, however what do counselors do when the religious beliefs of a client may be harmful to their psychological health? It seems that it would be possible to help clients see inconsistencies that are present in their interpretations of their religious beliefs and help them come to understandings of their religious beliefs which support their psychological health. Having listened to the stories of these participants, I think that the best course of action for counselors is that recommended by APA (2000) and AGLBIC (undated) namely, to work with clients first to see if the clients can find a way to affirm their sexual orientation. The attempt at reorientation based on religious grounds seems reasonable however, if a client is not able to find other ways to resolve their dilemma.

Another issue raised by the participants who sought to change their sexual orientation on religious grounds is the general belief among these participants that a minority sexual orientation is due to deficits or psychopathology. This belief is clearly in conflict with the views of all of the major professional organizations that deal with mental health (APA, 1997; APA maintains..., 1999; ACA, 1998). I find it difficult to imagine how someone would be able to conduct a sexual reorientation program or therapy and not view homosexuality in a negative light. The effort that seems to be required to establish a new non-homosexual identity needs to be fueled by some motivation or purpose outside of the task alone. Participants in the current study pursued

their change in sexual orientation due to beliefs about their acceptability in society, by family, in religious groups, and by God.

Implications for Counseling

Only two of the participants in this study utilized counseling in their process of reconciliation and dealing with their sexual orientation. One participant found her therapy experience to be helpful once she began to go to the therapist of her choice rather than one recommended by her committee. Another participant described a negative experience in counseling where he was expected to want to change his sexual orientation. This reminds us that many people are able to accomplish these significant psychological tasks without the assistance of counseling and that inappropriate counseling can be harmful.

Although the participants in this study did not make extensive use of counseling, their experiences underline the importance of affirmative counseling approaches. Affirmative counseling is not determinative. Clients need to feel free to establish their own understanding of their identities and come to their own resolutions of the directions they will eventually take. Ann described participating in therapy with an affirmative therapist for six months or more before she was ready to take on an identity as a lesbian. This therapist evidently helped the client to come to her own conclusions without determining the answers for her. The therapist also created an environment where the client was confident that her eventual conclusion would be supported and affirmed.

Proposed Model for the Reconciliation Process

From the analysis of these interviews, I feel it is possible to propose a model for the reconciliation process described by the participants. The following steps are found in

the majority of the narratives of those participants who had a reconciliation process.

1. A personal decision to move toward a desired direction.
2. Leaving a community of faith and/or an identity.
3. An experience of grief at what has been lost.
4. Creating a new identity (in faith or in sexual orientation).
5. Reconciliation with what is lost.

A personal decision to move toward a desired direction. Each of the participants articulated a decision they had made to move toward acceptance of their sexual orientation or to seek to change their sexual orientation. The two participants who tried to change their sexual orientation at one point in time, but then moved toward acceptance of their sexual orientation, evidence two different choices at two different points in time. DeLois (1993) also identifies this point of decision in her study of how women come to identify as lesbians.

Leaving a community of faith and/or an identity. The participants who chose to accept their sexual orientation left one faith community and sought out another. Bob is the only participant who was able to stay within the same religious tradition to accomplish this task, however he joined a congregation which specifically describes itself as affirming of gay and lesbian people and opposes the denominational policy. Jennifer left both a faith community and an identity. The participants who chose to change their sexual orientation left one identity for another. Ponticelli (1996) in her study of participants in an ex-gay ministry describes this as a stripping process.

An experience of grief at what has been lost. Most of the participants described a period of grief at what had been lost. This is reflected in the themes related to rejection

above. Some described this explicitly, calling it a grief process, others described periods of depression, sadness, and longing for what was no longer possible. O'Neill and Ritter (1992) have theorized a grief process in the journey of gay and lesbian people to come to terms with themselves spiritually. Fortunado (1982) also identifies grief as an important factor in the spiritual development of gay and lesbian persons.

Creating a new identity. Much of what was described by the participants is the process they went through to create a new identity. The participants who sought to change their sexual orientation engaged in an extensive reconstruction of their identities similar to that described by Ponticelli (1993, 1996, 1999). The participants who moved toward self-affirmation also describe adopting a new identity as gay and Christian, they describe this identity as honest and whole. Similar processes of identity formation are described by DeLois (1993) in her study of lesbians and Mason-Schrock (1996) in his study of transsexual's construction of identity.

Reconciliation with that which is lost. A final step of reconciliation with those things that were lost is described by only a few of the participants. Ann describes her participation in a protest against the denomination she left as a time of closure. Bob talks about reconciliation with his family and the significant relationships he has with straight persons in his church as important steps to complete healing. This step, although not achieved by all participants, may be seen as an ideal step in a completed reconciliation process. Reconciliation with loss and a transformed understanding of the meaning of loss is also identified in the theory of O'Neill and Ritter (1992).

Limitations

This study is for the purpose of initial exploration and discovery. The intent of this study is to inform future research on this comparatively understudied topic. The small sample size is appropriate for this purpose, however it is inappropriate to make inferences from the findings in this study and apply them to these populations as a whole. The study is intended as groundwork for further investigations of the particular themes that have been identified in this process.

The sample itself is quite limited. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate bisexual persons to include in the sample and thus that perspective is not included. The study was also not designed to include transsexual persons. The sample includes only one person from a racial minority group, however the interview with that participant indicates that this process may be more complicated to negotiate for persons who deal with stigma based on race and on sexual orientation.

The religious experience of the participants in this study was limited to Protestant Christians and heavily skewed toward Presbyterians. It cannot be known from this study how people from other religious traditions may deal with these issues differently. The sample was further limited to only those persons who have resolved their conflict between sexual orientation and religious beliefs by staying within traditional religious communities. There are many other directions people may chose to come to resolution of these issues outside of traditional religious communities and these options were not explored in this study.

The analysis of the data was conducted by three people, two of whom had little background in the specific field of study. A positive result of having readers whose

background is limited to that of a typical counselor is that the themes identified by these readers were clear to researchers who are not specialists in the field. The hermeneutical approach used, however, asks that researchers have a broad knowledge of the field of inquiry so that they may understand the subtleties of the texts they are interpreting. The validity of the study is limited by these constraints.

Further Research

The current study raises further questions and gives direction for further research. I would like to see this study carried beyond the current population to include bisexual and transgendered persons. I would also like to include persons who have reconciled their sexual orientation and religious beliefs through fulfilling their spiritual needs outside of traditional religious groups or by removing themselves from religious or spiritual pursuits. It would be interesting to expand the study to persons outside of the Protestant Christian traditions represented in this study.

I hope to do a further theological hermeneutical analysis of the interview transcripts in order to look more closely at the theological themes and shifts which characterize the reconciliation process.

The importance of the reinterpretation of Biblical passages leads me to want to study the impact of learning a new understanding of the Christian scriptures on those who hold varying religious beliefs. I wonder if learning affirmative interpretations of Biblical passages would reduce internalized homophobia for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people regardless of whether they hold strong religious commitments.

From this study, it is clear that the conflict of religious beliefs and sexual orientation is a significant issue for some gay and lesbian persons. This conflict is one which the participants in the study needed to resolve successfully in order to meet their spiritual needs and feel comfortable with themselves. The participants represented here demonstrate two opposite means of resolving this conflict: Affirming one's sexual orientation and adapting one's religious understandings or affirming one's religious understandings and changing one's sexual orientation. All of the participants report that they are satisfied with their current state.

Several key factors were important to this process for the participants in general. The experience of rejection of their sexual orientation was a key motivating factor for participants regardless of their eventual choice. They all expressed a reliance on God's love and acceptance and a need to be accepted in a religious community. The process of reconciliation has been lengthy for some of the participants and all have made some degree of change in their choice of religious communities in order to accomplish reconciliation.

This study points out the great need for further understanding in this area, especially as professional associations and individual therapists make important policy and treatment decisions. Counselors and psychotherapists need to be aware of the important influences of spiritual and religious motivations when working with gay and lesbian people and helping them to negotiate this conflict.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

My name is Shawn MacDonald and I am a graduate student in the Department of Counseling at the University of North Dakota (UND). I am conducting this study in partial fulfillment of requirements for my M. A. degree.

You are invited to participate in a study to learn more about the experience of persons who consider themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual and those who previously considered themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual but have sought to change their sexual orientation. Some of these persons refer to themselves as Ex-Gays.

For this study, you are asked to complete several survey instruments that will take about a half-hour to complete. Your responses to these items will be confidential, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. There is no known risk involved in completing these instruments. However, there is the possible risk of psychological distress. It is hoped that your participation will assist in understanding the experience of the persons studied.

An additional study consisting of person-to-person or telephone interviews on this same area of interest will be conducted later this summer. If you are interested in participating in this study please complete the interest form at the end of the packet. This form will be kept separately from the other surveys where only the researcher has access to them and will be matched to your other responses only through a code system. The interest forms will be destroyed following the completion of that phase of the research, or within six-months of today's date.

To preserve your confidentiality, this consent form and the surveys you complete are given a matching numerical code. Following the completion of the instruments, your name on this consent form will be blacked out with a marking pen. The consent forms for this study will be stored separately from the instruments in this study in a locked filing cabinet in the Department of Counseling at UND. Only the researcher and the department staff will have access to this filing cabinet. We are required to keep these records for a minimum of three years. After three years time, the forms will be destroyed. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your written permission.

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not change your future relations with the University of North Dakota. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation as any time without it being held against you.

The investigators involved are available to answer any question you have concerning this program. In addition you are encouraged to ask any questions concerning

this program that you may have in the future. Questions may be asked by calling Shawn MacDonald at (701) 795-4029 (e-mail: shawn_macdonald@und.nodak.edu) or Dr. Don Daughtry, Advisor, at the Department of Counseling at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202 or (701) 777-2729 (e-mail: daughtry@badlands.nodak.edu). You will be given a copy of this form for your reference.

ALL OF MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED AND I AM ENCOURAGED TO ASK ANY QUESTIONS THAT I MAY HAVE CONCERNING THIS STUDY IN THE FUTURE.

I have read all of the above and willingly agree to participate in this study explained to me by Shawn MacDonald.

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Demographic Form

Today's Date: _____ Current Age: _____ Gender: _____

1. How do you describe your racial/ethnic identity? _____
2. How do you describe your current sexual orientation? _____
3. If you previously identified yourself by a different sexual orientation, what was that and what age were you at that time? _____
4. At what age did you recognize that you had interest in persons of the same sex? _____
5. In what, if any, religious tradition were you raised? _____
6. What is your current religious affiliation (denomination, religion)?

7. How often do you participate in organized religious activities? Circle the response which most applies to you:

- a. Daily b. Weekly c. Several times a month d. Monthly
e. Several times a year f. Less than once a year g. Not at all

8. Check the items below which best describe your involvement with your religious organization:

- _____ not involved in an organized religious institution
_____ not a member but attend
_____ a member
_____ an officer in the church (non-clergy)

_____ clergy

_____ non-clergy employee

_____ other, please explain:

10. Have you attended seminary, Bible College, or other formal religious training?

Please describe.

11. Have you ever tried to change your sexual orientation? YES NO

a. If, so, at what age?

b. How long did you pursue this?

c. What was the result of your efforts?

12. On the following scale, how satisfied are you with the current state of your sexual orientation?

Very Satisfied

Very Dissatisfied

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

13. On the following scale, how satisfied are you with your current spiritual or religious practices?

Very Satisfied

Very Dissatisfied

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Interest Form

Participation in the interview phase is optional. If you do not want to participate in an interview phase please stop here and leave this page blank.

An additional study consisting of person-to-person or telephone interviews on this same area of interest will be conducted later this summer. These interviews will include questions about your sexual orientation, your efforts to accept and/or change your sexual orientation, and your religious beliefs and spiritual life. If you are interested in participating in this study please complete this interest form. This form will be kept separately from the other surveys where only the researcher has access to them and will be matched to your other responses only through a code system. Identifying information on this form will be blacked out with a marking pen upon completion of the interview phase.

The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. When they are transcribed all identifying information will be removed before they are used in the study. Once the interview is transcribed the tapes will be erased. This form and transcript will be stored for three years and then destroyed (as required by regulations). Only the researcher and her adviser will have access to the study materials (tapes, forms, transcripts). Only short, unidentifiable statements from the interviews would be quoted in a report of the study. You will have the opportunity to tell me specifically what you want changed or protected from the interview.

If you respond to this invitation at this time, you are free to choose not to participate in the interview when I contact you or during the interview itself. If I contact you by phone and you are not present I will simply leave my name and phone number but no reason for the call.

I would like to participate in the interview study and I consent for Shawn MacDonald to contact me by phone and/or email to arrange for this interview. I also consent for a code to be used so that my responses to the surveys and the interview my be matched.

Participant's Signature

Date

Contact Information

Name _____

Phone (with Area Code) _____

Is it OK for me to leave a message at this number? Circle One: YES NO

Best times to reach you at this number: _____

E-mail _____

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Introduction

I am interested in the connections between sexual orientation and spirituality and in the ways that people have chosen to reconcile their spirituality and their sexual orientation. I will be asking you questions about your experience of your sexual orientation, the ways that you have sought to reconcile your religious beliefs and sexual orientation, what motivated you to take the actions you took and how you feel about your present state.

This interview is being tape-recorded and will be transcribed by myself at a later date. When the interview is transcribed all identifying information about yourself, others you mention and programs you mention will be changed to protect your confidentiality. Only small, unidentifiable statements from this interview will be included in the final report of this research.

If you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions that I ask in this interview, you are free to decline to answer them. You also are free to end the interview at any point. At the conclusion of the interview, if you do not want your responses included in the study, you may ask that your interview be removed from the study and erased. You may also ask that certain details of your interview be removed when the tape is transcribed to protect your confidentiality. However, your confidentiality will be protected in this study and all of your responses are helpful to understanding the question at hand.

Section 1 – Coming-Out

- A. When did you first think that you might be gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (glbt) and what was that experience like for you?
- B. What were your religious beliefs at the time?
- C. What impact did your religious beliefs have on your feelings about your sexual orientation?

Section 2 – Reconciliation of Sexual Orientation and Religious beliefs

In this section I am interested in your experience since you first realized that you might be GLBT, therefore you may have several different responses for these questions. (I expect that this section will bounce around some based on how the participant makes sense of his or her own story.)

- A. Efforts to change sexual orientation.
 - 1. What, if anything, did you do to try to change or deny your sexual orientation?
 - 2. What motivated you to take these actions?
 - 3. How did you feel about yourself as the result of these actions?
 - 4. How did these actions affect your spiritual or religious experience?
- B. Efforts to accept sexual orientation
 - 1. What, if anything, did you do to try to understand or accept your sexual orientation?
 - 2. What motivated you to take these actions?
 - 3. How did you feel about yourself as the result of these actions?
 - 4. How did these actions affect your spiritual or religious experience?
- C. Change in Religious Beliefs
 - 1. Did your religious beliefs or spirituality change in connection to your attempts to deal with your sexual orientation?

Section 3 – Sexual orientation change programs

- A. Did you participate in any programs, therapies or ministries that had the goal of changing your sexual orientation?
- B. What were your reasons for participating in these programs?
- C. How did the program you participated in work?
- D. How long did you participate in these programs and what was the result of your efforts?
- E. What was most helpful in these programs?
- F. What was not helpful in these programs?

Section 4 – Present Status

- A. How do you describe your sexual orientation now?
- B. How do you experience your sexual attractions? (Are they toward male or female, are they strong or weak?)
- C. How comfortable are you with your current sexual desires and attraction?
- D. What is your current spiritual or religious experience like?
- E. How comfortable or satisfied are you with your current religious or spiritual experience?

Section 5 – Closing questions

- A. What else would you like me to know or what else would you like to say about your experience that you would like to be included in the study?
- B. Are you comfortable with your responses being included in the study?
- C. When I transcribe this interview I will change all details such as names, places, churches, and programs. Are there any details beside these that you would like changed in the study?
- D. Do you still give your permission to have a transcript of this interview included in this study?

- E. Thank you for your participation. Your responses will be valuable in understanding the relationship between sexual orientation and spiritual or religious beliefs and practices.

APPENDIX E

Reading Guide

First Reading

Read through the interview to get an understanding of the participant's story and a sense of the whole.

Second Reading – Rejection of Minority Sexual Orientation (MSO)

Definition: explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to deny or reject his or her MSO. Also include experiences of rejection due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.

Read through Interview and mark with ORANGE pencil those passages that indicate to you evidence of the above definition.

Worksheet. Record your responses to this reading on the worksheet.

Third Reading – Affirmation of Minority Sexual Orientation

Definition: explicit or implicit efforts of the participant to accept or affirm his or her MSO. Also include experiences of affirmation due to having or being perceived to have a MSO.

Read through Interview and mark with PURPLE pencil those passages that indicate to you evidence of the above definition.

Worksheet. Record your responses to this reading on the worksheet.

Fourth Reading – Reconciliation of Religious Beliefs and Sexual Orientation

Definition: reconciliation is the process used to reduce tension between religious beliefs and MSO.

Read through interview and mark with a RED pencil those passages that indicate a tension between MSO and religious beliefs or experience; mark with a GREEN pencil those passages which indicate affirmation of MSO by religious beliefs or experience.

Mark points in the narrative that you feel are key transitions or important points in the person's journey toward reconciliation.

Worksheet. Record your responses to this reading on the worksheet.

Summary

Select a brief passage from the interview text that exemplifies the story told by this participant of his/her experience of reconciling his/her religious beliefs and sexual orientation.

APPENDIX F

Data Analysis Worksheet

Transcript: _____

Reader: _____

Date: _____

II. Second Reading

1. Rejection of SMO is predominant in the early narrative Yes _____ No _____
2. Rejection of SMO is Predominant in the current status Yes _____ No _____

What key aspects contribute to the rejection of SMO in this narrative according to the participant?

III. Third Reading

1. Affirmation of SMO is predominant in the early narrative Yes _____ No _____
2. Affirmation of SMO is predominant in the current status Yes _____ No _____

What key aspects contribute to the affirmation of SMO in this narrative according to the participant?

IV. Fourth Reading

1. Does this narrative describe a reconciliation process? Yes _____ No _____
2. Does the narrative describe a change in religious beliefs in order to accomplish reconciliation? Yes _____ No _____
3. Does the narrative describe a change (or attempt to change) in order to accomplish reconciliation? Yes _____ No _____

What are the significant aspects of the reconciliation process?

V. Summary

In one or two sentences, summarize the process of reconciliation of religious beliefs and sexual orientation in this narrative.

APPENDIX G

Participant Recruiting Poster

GAY and EX-GAY STUDY

For my Thesis in a Master in Counseling program, I am studying the ways that GLB people reconcile their religious faith and sexual orientation. I am looking for Gay and Ex-Gay persons who are willing to fill out some surveys about their religious beliefs and sexual orientation. I am also looking for persons who are willing to be interviewed about how they reconciled their religious beliefs and sexual orientation. I am a lesbian Presbyterian, but I want people to know that this is not about judging the options others have taken but about understanding them and providing more research in this area for counselors and psychologists.

Look for me on Monday around the Hyatt Regency Ballrooms with my Hot Pink signs. If you want to respond more confidentially, please e-mail me with a way to reach you at shawn_macdonald@und.nodak.edu.

APPENDIX H

Exemplars of Participant's Comments

Ann

Reader 1

What I've had to struggle with is what the church is and what religion is UM-HMM and then my calling with respect to that which really wasn't shaken but it was like almost, where is it that I am supposed to be UM-HMM where now God? UM-HMM And not knowing that for a year cause I sort of wondered around and visited different places, UM-HMM because no place seemed right. It wasn't until I finished seminary and got completely out of the Presbyterian church that things fell into place. UH-HUH But it is a grief process. I hope you heard that piece, I probably didn't emphasize that, it's a grief process, coming out letting go of your expectations of what life would be like UH-HUH and what others told you UH-HUH and it can affect your spirituality. In my case it was more of speaking the truth and being willing to accept it. UM-HMM Continuing to believe that God is good, God loves me, all of those basics of the gospel UH-HUH that's all that I would add.

Reader 2

And for me that's how I processed it, there was a lot of subconscious work in my dreams and there were a few moments like those where I would just have those a-ha moments in the morning with breakthroughs. UM-HMM It was so strong that that was how I had to work in my sub-conscious and my dreaming because it would do the work. Whereas I had just shut down my conscious so much I wasn't even aware of what I was feeling. So it was a real struggle for me to regain my feelings.

Bob

Reader 1

I actually came out in the church and in the Presbytery, before really coming out at work UH-HUH so, I mean I really, with in two, maybe three years of working here, of my adult life, post college, I shared my whole story to the Presbytery at a Presbytery meeting early on, but UH-HUH. And I did that really as a challenge, um, to myself, um, not that I really felt that I was ready to do it, but that I did it as a challenge through faith, UH-HUH, and um I always I guess I sort of latched onto the notion of being open to being vulnerable with each other is what God calls us to do as Christians, UH-HUH and, you gain strength, you gain courage, and so it really opened doors to me, it opened my doors to receive God's grace and be more reconciled to um to other Christians and to the world really UH-HUH So, um, but I think really important in all of that spirit, in all of that

journey of reconciliation, is finding the people who could consciously be your family your faith family WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT? Well, like people who are going to be there, people who are going to be the earthly manifestation of the God who is with you UH-HUH Um, um we need signs, we need human signs of God's presence in our lives.

Reader 2

I guess I sort of latched onto the notion of being open to being vulnerable with each other is what God calls us to do as Christians, UH-HUH and, you gain strength, you gain courage, and so it really opened doors to me, it opened my doors to receive God's grace and be more reconciled to um to other Christians and to the world really UH-HUH So, um, but I think really important in all of that spirit, in all of that journey of reconciliation, is finding the people who could consciously be your family your faith family.

And I think when you can be yourself, then you can it's ok to be spiritual and its ok to be sexual and to see the spirituality in your sexuality and vice versa and it just opens up a whole new, its like seeing the world again for the first time UM-HMM everything is new and that is very exciting.

Curt

Reader 1

I was dealing with a lot of the emotional stuff I was going through and as I began to work on those emotional issues as I began to see how I related to people in ways that weren't very good UH-HUH and um, and started to change in how I related to people I started to become more confident, um more accepting of myself, I really learned to like who I was and of course it was a process it took several years for this to develop UM-HMM but I noticed as I developed in working through these emotional issues and relationship issues, especially my relationship with God then I started to change in my sexual desires UM-HMM so, it was kind of a by product of the issues I was dealing with internally UM-HMM the emotional issues and spiritual issues and so that's how I see it and that's how I still look at it for other people is that um you need to be able to have a focus not on being able to overcome the desires but on working on the details inside of your heart UM-HMM and once you do that then a natural by product is that your sexual desires fall into place the way that they were intended UM-HMM and that's what happened with me and it was about a ten year process that it happened where I went from having only homosexual desires to having only heterosexual desires.

Reader 2

So, it was kind of a by product of the issues I was dealing with internally UM-HMM the emotional issues and spiritual issues and so that's how I see it and that's how I still look at it for other people is that um you need to be able to have a focus not on being able to overcome the desires but on working on the details inside of your heart UM-HMM and once you do that then a natural by product is that your sexual desires fall into place the way that they were intended UM-HMM and that's what happened with me and it was

about a ten year process that it happened where I went from having only homosexual desires to having only heterosexual desires.

Gail

Reader 1

Well, I never really had any trouble reconciling them because you know I felt that God made me this way and if God made me this way it was because it was planned and you know as they say God doesn't make any junk UH-HUH So I figured that if that was the case then it was ok with God so therefore it was going to be ok with me UH-HUH I don't usually have too much trouble with people and with their ideologies of what they think I should be and if they do I don't really usually care UH-HUH you know because what I feel inside is where I need to be UH-HUH and so I usually go that way

Reader 3

Well, I never really had any trouble reconciling them because you know I felt that God made me this way and if God made me this way it was because it was planned and you know as they say God doesn't make any junk UH-HUH So I figured that if that was the case then it was ok with God so therefore it was going to be ok with me

Jennifer

Reader 1

I attribute that really to the approach of that ministry, UM-HMM that let me go there in spite of how messy and you know weird and whatever it might have been and looked like. UM-HMM It wasn't nice and neat I wasn't following you know the great little program, but I was really you know letting God touch places that were deep inside and I had the freedom to unearth them so that was a real key. And so it's really made a difference in how I am able to relate to women and also how I am able to relate to men. UM-HMM OK And how I am able even to relate even to relate to God because if God is like whatever things impacted us when we were kids well he can be quite an ogre sometimes or strict or legalistic or whatever you know, although I do believe that he has a structure which we call his laws

Reader 3

So um, so any way, I ended up getting involved with a um an ex-gay ministry UM-HMM and um really probably for the first time really had somebody that was willing to hear both sides of what was going on with me UM-HMM. They were willing to hear that yeah you've had relationships with women and yeah they've probably were not what God had in mind and yeah you probably really did learn something from them. Because like the gay community is like obviously willing to accept you with open arm if you love other women but they won't acknowledge that there might be anything wrong with that and a lot of times the Christian community, and in this case that new age organization that I was apart of, were willing to certainly acknowledge that there was a problem but they weren't willing to acknowledge that God was working with it at all.

Michelle

Reader 1

That was probably around from 1986 on when I decided I was going to live, I don't know how, but from that point on I accepted myself in 1986 in my sexual orientation and I had never thought of going back. UM-HMM And so I wholly embraced who I was but again it came back to the longing for God and all that I just described. So I was very, I had gotten that part of the issue settled, that part of the equation, and then it wasn't until later I that my whole faith and religious understanding came together and that is at the point of like 1997.

Reader 3

Did my religious understanding change? YEAH Very much so. I went from a very literal interpretation of the Bible and very traditional values to understanding the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law, from black and white to freedom, from conservative theology to liberation theology, and so yeah it changed and interestingly I didn't have word for any of it and it wasn't until I came into the United Church of Christ in 1997 that I could put words to some of the things that I had worked out within myself.

Neil

Reader 1

And whereas for me it was good to find a church where I didn't get wild and crazy and I didn't get to the point where I felt that all hope was gone and I had nothing else to live for. God does love me just the way I am. God may not always understand me and I may not always understand God. He always understands me, he knows more about me than I know about myself. But I do not understand God but I feel comfort in the fact that when I wake up every morning I know that today is not promised to me, tomorrow is not promised to me, and so I thank God for each day that I have and so I will continue to try if ever needed to make a difference in someone's life, to try to help them find that happy medium.

Reader 3

Um, it calmed the storm. The storms keep raging in my life, you know but it really did calm the storm. And, through that, through you know MCC, my friends, my Christian friends and my support system, I found answers, answers to questions that I had for years. But hate was not a virtue that God subscribed to, and that he was loving. He is a God of wrath and he can get angry, um but just anger, not unjust anger. He doesn't fault anyone for something they have no control over. And this is something that I learned through that.

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