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# “We are God’s Children, Y’All:” Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Lesbian- and Gay-Affirming Congregations

Krista McQueeney, *Salem College*

*This article examines how lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming members of lesbian- and gay-affirming churches in the South challenged a deep-rooted Christian belief in homosexual sin. Data are taken from 200 hours of participant observation and 25 in-depth interviews in two Protestant churches: one predominantly black, working class, lesbian, and evangelical, and the other mostly white, middle class, heterosexual, and liberal. I identify three strategies lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming church members used to accommodate—but not assimilate—to heteronormative conceptions of the “good Christian.” First, some black lesbians minimized their sexuality as secondary to the Christian identity. Second, most lesbian and gay members—both black and white—normalized their sexuality by enacting Christian morals of monogamy, manhood, and motherhood. Third, a small group of black lesbian/gay and white, straight-but-affirming members moralized their sexuality as grounds for challenging homophobia in the church. Using these strategies, church members both resisted notions of homosexual sin and reproduced a “politics of respectability” (Warner 1999) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Findings shed empirical light on two issues in the social problems literature: (1) the inseparability of race and gender from sexual identity; and (2) the importance of an intersectional analysis in assessing the possibilities of faith-based strategies for sexual equality. Keywords: identity, intersectionality, religion, sexuality, heteronormativity.*

For most conservative (i.e., fundamentalist and evangelical) Christians, God’s will is expressed in a heterosexual family in which male and female are complementary and the primary purpose of sex is procreation (Ellingson, Tebbe, Van Haitisma, and Laumann 2001; Wolkomir 2006). According to a twentieth-century literal interpretation, God created man as protector/leader and woman as nurturer/helper (Ammerman 1987; Bartkowski 2001; Foster 1995). Biblical interpretation of homosexual sex as a sin further consolidates the belief in heterosexual marriage as the only proper context for sexual activity (Roof and McKinney 1987; Thumma 1991). Although evangelicals may redefine male headship in everyday life (Gallagher and Smith 1999; Denton 2004), the gendered, heterosexual family remains at the heart of conservative Christianity (Williams 1974; Wolkomir 2006).

But even as Christianity has been used to justify women’s subordination (Daly 1975; Ruether 1974) and to condemn homosexuals (Butler 1990; Moon 2004), its beliefs in the inherent dignity of all people and freedom from oppression represent seeds of liberation (Cone 1975, 1984). For example, nineteenth-century evangelicals read the New Testament as a call to abolish slavery and promote women’s suffrage (Hersh 1978; Stewart 1976). In the twentieth century, Christians developed a liberation theology to challenge class injustice (Smith 1991). Inspired by these Christian beliefs, some Protestant churches have welcomed people who

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identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (Comstock 2001). This article uses participant observation and in-depth interviews in two mainline Protestant, lesbian- and gay-affirming<sup>1</sup> congregations in the South to analyze how lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming church members reinterpreted Christian beliefs to include people traditionally stigmatized by their sexuality. One church was predominantly black<sup>2</sup>, lesbian, working class<sup>3</sup>, and evangelical Protestant, and the other was mostly white, heterosexual, upper middle class, and liberal Protestant.

The lesbian women and gay men I studied—black and white—found themselves caught between dominant Christian culture and gay subcultures. Homosexuality carries a heavy stigma within Christianity, placing lesbians, gays, and bisexuals on lesser ground than their straight counterparts. These black and white lesbian and gay believers sought recognition as Christians and members of the church family, but they were greeted by traditions that privileged heterosexuality and the twentieth-century evangelical gendered family. Even so, their participation in Christian institutions upset the heterosexual assumption (Foucault 1972; Gramsci 1971). In this article, I challenge binary notions of resistance to or reproduction of inequality by unpacking the complex and contradictory ways that black and white lesbian women and gay men, most raised conservative Christian, resisted notions of homosexual sin<sup>4</sup> and reproduced a “politics of respectability” (Warner 1999) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Together with their straight-but-affirming allies, lesbian and gay church members engaged in oppositional identity work to challenge homosexual stigma and fashion good Christian identities. Oppositional identity work involves “transform[ing] discrediting identities into crediting ones and redefining those identities so they can be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:141). Church members defined homosexuality as normal and moral by mobilizing the “identity formation material” (McRobbie 1994) offered up in their social worlds. As I will show, they mobilized Christian discourse—the very language, beliefs, and institutional arrangements that cast lesbians and gay men as sinful—to “mainstream” (Vaid 1995) or “normalize” (Warner 1999) homosexuality. I will argue that their oppositional identity work emerged as lesbian and gay Christians stood with one foot set to enter a heterosexist institution, and the other poised to kick over the heterosexist beliefs and traditions that deemed them unworthy.

How did lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming church members construct and perform good Christian identities in the face of this stigma? From a social constructionist perspective, identities are shaped by macro discourses and structures (Omi and Winant 1986; Nagel 1996) and everyday interactions (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). In this view, identity does not represent a person’s essence; people “do” identities differently across contexts and situations. These church members drew on Christian discourses surrounding sexuality (e.g., monogamy as the moral ideal for sexual relations) that circulate in the culture. But sexuality is never separate from other systems of domination, such as racism and

1. I use members’ own language to describe sexual identity and the churches’ “inclusive” stance. “Lesbian- and gay-affirming” churches welcome lesbians and gay men as full members and clergy. Though members occasionally described their churches as “LGBT”-affirming, nonheterosexuals were usually subsumed under the term “gay.” Because participants naturalized sexuality (hetero/homo) as God given, the language of inclusion rarely upset dualistic notions of sexuality (or gender).

2. Following members’ language, I use the term “black” to designate people of African Diaspora living in the United States. For some members, the term African American leaves out black first-generation immigrants and those who do not, for whatever reason, identify as African American.

3. Though class is always defined in historical, relational, and race- and gender-specific terms (Bettie 2003), I typify the class status of church members based on socioeconomic status (income, occupation, and educational attainment). While this is useful for descriptive purposes, many black Faith Church members (some of whom I categorize as working class) viewed themselves as middle class and upwardly mobile.

4. Conservative Christians often cite Genesis 19:1–29, Leviticus 18:19–23, Deuteronomy 23:17–8, I Corinthians 6:9–11, and Romans 1:26–27, among other verses, as proof that homosexual sex is an abomination before God. The Bible refers to homosexual acts as sinful or unnatural in at least six passages.

sexism. I will argue that the strategies congregants used to construct and perform lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming Christian identities were shaped not only by the institutional and cultural contexts they occupied, but also by their differential locations in systems of race and gender inequality.

As such, this article moves beyond a difference-blind analysis by examining how race, gender, and sexuality—as distinct but intersecting systems that shape knowledge and identity—influenced members' resistance to a stigmatizing Christian ideology. Previous research has offered insight into how white gay men (Thumma 1991; Wolkomir 2006) and white lesbians (Mahaffy 1996) reconcile the conflict between gay/lesbian and Christian identities. Yet these studies have placed sexual-Christian identity negotiation at the analytical center, treating race and gender as secondary. As intersectional feminists (Collins 2000; Zinn and Dill 1996) have argued, a unitary analysis of gender or sexuality can imply a false universalism rooted in white, middle class experience. The church members I studied—black, white, lesbian, gay, and straight—all faced a conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. Yet they crafted different strategies to deal with this conflict. These group-specific strategies were rooted in their differential access to resources, power, and meanings. I contend that without examining how sexuality interacts with other social identities—in this case, race and gender—we cannot fully understand the forms and consequences of sexual identity in the contemporary United States.

Finally, church members' oppositional identity work sheds important light on the possibilities and limits of faith to combat prevailing constructions of homosexuality as a social problem. Recently, scholars and activists have marshaled faith as a resource to advocate for marriage equality and other LGBT rights. Andrew Yip (2002) points to religion as a framework for practicing sexual inclusion, and Gary Comstock (1996), David Shallenberger (1998), Timothy Buzzell (2001), and Melissa Wilcox (2003) argue that lesbians and gay men are creating more inclusive Christian churches. In political activist circles, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)—the nation's largest LGBT political organization—launched a religion and faith program in 2006, and that same year the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) joined forces with the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), a coalition of Protestant gay caucuses. Like "inclusive" religious institutions, secular organizations are mobilizing religious discourse in an attempt to reclaim the language of faith and moral values from the Christian right, which has fixed the idea of a "homosexual agenda" out to destroy "the family" and traditional morality in the mainstream consciousness (Herman 1997). Church members' identity work thus emerged in a context where faith-based discourses are pivotal in framing homosexuality as a social problem, as cast by the left *and* the right. Because church members' construction and performance of identities reflects and reinforces faith-based discourses around homosexuality, their identity work offers a case study of how moral discourses can work to resist and/or reproduce race, gender, and sexual inequalities.

## Research Method

From August 1998 to August 2002, I studied two lesbian- and gay-affirming churches in the Southeast. I observed and participated in worship services, Bible studies, holy unions<sup>5</sup>, social events, and regional conferences (I spent over 200 hours in the field). I recorded detailed field notes from memory after fieldwork, and wrote notes-on-notes (Kleinman and Copp 1993) to develop emerging themes. I employed "theoretical sampling" (Glaser

5. Both churches held "holy unions" (same-sex commitment ceremonies). These unions were contentious in the local community; several ministers and congregations had recently been expelled from mainline Protestant denominations for violating church authority on this issue. As a result, the pastors made concerted efforts to "keep the media out of" these ceremonies.

and Strauss 1967) to select interview informants based on themes I noted in the field. I conducted 25 semi-structured, open-ended interviews (with 21 parishioners and the 4 pastors), which I tape-recorded and transcribed in full. I coded my field notes and interview transcripts for thematic content (Lofland and Lofland 1995). I also analyzed newsletters, local newspaper articles, listserv messages, and publications disseminated by the churches and their denominations.

I approached this study from a feminist (Kleinman 2007), symbolic interactionist (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) perspective. Aware of my own perspective and privilege as a white, lesbian graduate student field-worker, I routinely reflected and wrote analytical memos about how my expectations, biases, and interactions with participants shaped my analysis.

## Settings

### *Faith Church*

I did participant observation and 11 in-depth interviews<sup>6</sup> with the pastor and lay members of Faith Church from August 1998 to August 2001. Part of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), Faith Church was a 60-member evangelical congregation in a midsize Southern city attended primarily by working class black lesbians. Pastor Paula<sup>7</sup>, a black lesbian in her mid-30s, founded Faith Church in November of 1997. After serving as a “lay pastor” in a nearby white, gay male sister congregation, Pastor Paula had a vision that God was calling her to create a church home for black LGBT people, who, as she put it, were “marginalized by the white gay community *and* the Black Church.”

Church members<sup>8</sup> ranged in age from 14 to 68, but most were in their late 30s and early 40s. The MCC is an ecumenical network that encourages a diversity of beliefs and practices within a Christian-Trinitarian theology. The MCC is regarded as “for all practical purposes, a mainline-style church body” (Dart 2001:6). However, it is not sufficiently established, historically or institutionally, to meet most scholarly definitions of a “mainline” denomination (e.g., Roof and McKinney 1987). Thus, church members’ identity construction must be seen in light of this marginal status—even as the MCC in general, and Faith Church in particular, strove to become mainstream institutions.

Given the MCC’s loose structure<sup>9</sup> and most members’ upbringing in black Baptist churches, their worship style and belief system resembled many contemporary black evangelical Christian churches, with the caveat that all God’s children, including homosexuals, possess inherent dignity and worth and are welcome in the church. They were committed to creating an “inclusive” Christian community and to welcoming those who experienced conflict between their sexuality and their faith. The MCC *Mission Statement* reads:

We embody and proclaim Christian salvation and liberation, Christian inclusivity and community, and Christian social action and justice. We serve among those seeking and celebrating the integration of their spirituality and sexuality (UFMCC 2002).

6. I interviewed 5 black lesbians, 1 black gay man, 5 white lesbians, and the pastor (Pastor Paula) at Faith Church. I used “theoretical sampling” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to select interviewees using hypotheses that emerged in the field. As a white woman entering a predominantly black church, I hoped to gain enough rapport for participants to share their experiences with me. Therefore, I spent two years in the field before conducting interviews.

7. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of study participants.

8. At Faith Church, most members identified as lesbian, and a few as gay, bisexual, or transgender. There were also children who attended with their parents; I exclude them from the demographic profile of the congregation.

9. All congregations follow bylaws, directives, and policies dictated by the denomination, but local congregations have considerable autonomy to create their own style and identity. In the broader denomination, congregations range from evangelical to charismatic to liturgical to New Age.



Faith Church positioned itself as on the “vanguard” of Christianity. It vowed to “confront racism, sexism, and poverty through Christian social action” and to create a “new theology of sexuality.” At the same time, the MCC distanced itself from a “gay” identity:

While we are often referred to as “The Gay Church,” we are also very clear that this is a misnomer. The phrase “Gay Church” seems to focus on its sexuality. We focus on Jesus Christ. A “Gay Church” would seem to be just for Gay people, we are a church for *all* people (emphasis in original) (UFMCC 2002).

As an MCC church, Faith Church focused on salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus. Faith Church members adapted liberationist language common in black churches to fit gay and lesbian experience. For example, members routinely testified that Jesus “freed” them from the “shackles” of sin and suffering and built a “fence” to protect them from the temptations of Satan and the world.

The leadership at Faith Church viewed the Bible as the inspired Word of God, to be interpreted within its historical context. Consistent with liberation theology, they argued that just as whites used the Bible to deny blacks rights and human dignity, heterosexuals use Scripture to exclude gays and lesbians from God’s kingdom. A black lesbian church leader explained:

We live by the Word of God. But black people have always known there was a “Bible within a Bible;” there are stories . . . within the stories . . . it’s not . . . the way white people use it. As a people, we have a history of reading the Bible [in a way] that nourishes our journey . . . and brings us closer to Jesus, our Lord and Savior (interview).

By reading the Bible in a way that “nourishe[d] [their] journey” and brought them “closer to Jesus,” members claimed full membership in God’s kingdom.

### *Unity Church*

I also did participant observation and 14 in-depth interviews<sup>10</sup> with the pastors and gay and lesbian members of Unity Church between July 2001 and August 2002. Unity Church, part of the United Church of Christ (UCC), was a 550-member, predominantly white, middle class, liberal Protestant church in a southeastern university town. Founded in 1910, Unity Church had a history of outreach for peace and justice and legitimacy as a mainline denomination that Faith Church lacked. Members described Unity as an “established,” “inclusive,” “liberal” alternative to the “exclusive” and “condemning” conservative Christian majority in the South. The UCC’s New Testament emphasis encouraged members to model themselves—individually and as a group—after Jesus, who embraced and forgave all believers. Unity became lesbian and gay affirming in 1993 by a nearly unanimous congregational vote, two years after heterosexual parents with adult lesbian/gay children challenged the church to welcome homosexuals as an official church policy.

Unity was a mostly heterosexual, family-oriented congregation. There were three pastors: a white heterosexual couple (Beth and Gary), who were called to ministry in 1979, and a white lesbian associate pastor (Rebecca), who was called in 2000. Rebecca headed the youth ministry, but the heterosexual head pastors and lesbian/gay parishioners also expected her to counsel and befriend the gay/lesbian members since she was a lesbian. As I discuss elsewhere (McQueeney 2005), this created demands and dilemmas stemming from her “token” status in the ministry (Kanter 1977).

Most of Unity’s heterosexual members had relocated to the South from the Northeast or Midwest, where they were raised liberal Protestant (e.g., Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ). In contrast, most lesbian and gay members—about 10 percent<sup>11</sup>

10. I interviewed 5 white lesbians, 2 white gay men, and Unity’s 3 pastors (Beth, Gary, and Rebecca).

11. Unity’s pastors and church members reported that 10 percent of the congregation was gay/lesbian, based on profiles in the church directory.

of the congregation—grew up Southern Baptist.<sup>12</sup> Like Faith Church, Unity encouraged parishioners to interpret the Bible in its historical context, an approach the pastors promoted in sermons and small group studies on “Sexuality and the Bible,” “Bible Stories Through Different Eyes,” and contemporary Christian books such as *Open Christianity* (Burklo 2000). Members centered Unity’s identity in inclusivity, often reciting the verse from Galatians 3:28 printed on the weekly bulletin: “In Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free.”

### The Homosexual/Christian Conflict

The lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming<sup>13</sup> Christians at Faith and Unity churches came to resist heteronormative conceptions of sexuality, gender, and the family because of the perceived identity conflict that they, their children, or their fellow church members faced. Raised as conservative Christians, most of the lesbian and gay members based their sense of themselves as good people on a set of beliefs that now condemned them as abominations before God (Melton 1991). Some had been cast out of their home churches and birth families. Even those who were not still experienced feelings of guilt and shame. Emily, a 36-year-old white lesbian raised Southern Baptist, recalled:

Feeling like I was gay was against everything I knew about homosexuality in the Bible growing up, that gays and lesbians were not good people, and I had always considered myself a good person . . . I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior [at] 13 . . . so I struggled for years with . . . am I good, or am I not (interview)?

For Emily and others, being a Christian was a “moral identity” (Katz 1975; Kleinman 1996)—it signaled her worth as a person. Identifying as “gay” violated a biblical interpretation that, in no uncertain terms, marked her as not “a good person.” This conflict was not easy to resolve. Most of these lesbians and gay men had relied on their Christian identity since childhood as evidence that they were good people; few could simply reject the Christian identity. But nor did they feel they could suppress their same-sex desires. “In retrospect,” Emily continued, “I wish I’d known of a stable resource like the church I go to now, where I could have said, ‘OK, I can be gay and be a quote unquote normal person.’” These churches gave lesbian women and gay men a space to redefine their stigmatized sexuality by constructing and performing identities as lesbian/gay *and* Christian. In doing so, many lesbian and gay parishioners aligned their moral identity with their sexual identity and reclaimed a sense of dignity and worth.

Meanwhile, straight-but-affirming Christians did not face a sexual stigma directly. But they, too, had a reason to do oppositional identity work. The Unity members who challenged their church to become lesbian and gay affirming were parents of lesbian or gay children, and confronted a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman 1963) by virtue of that association. Thus, their identity as good middle class parents was threatened by an ideology that blames parents for their children’s successes and failures (Berger 1981; Fields 2001). Additionally, all members—regardless of sexual identity—risked their Christian legitimacy by being part of a church that

12. Several gay and lesbian Unity members said in interviews that they would prefer to attend a church more like the conservative Christian churches of their upbringing, but that did not condemn homosexuals. Because such churches did not exist in the area, lesbian and gay members settled for a more “liberal” church. Unity members often noted that lesbian and gay members knew more about the Bible, and embraced a more literal biblical interpretation, than their heterosexual counterparts.

13. While I interviewed Unity’s heterosexual co-pastors, I did not interview heterosexual church members. However, I talked to everyone I could (while trying not to assume members’ sexual identification) before and after church, at Bible studies, and at social events. The quotes I provide from heterosexual members come from their public avowals or informal conversation.



declared a lesbian- and gay-affirming mission. In short, identifying as a straight-but-affirming Christian in the Southern Bible Belt—where churches were expelled and pastors defrocked for accepting gays and lesbians—cast all members, as one put it, as “heretics or radicals” in the Christian eye. Thus, *all* members did oppositional identity work to disassociate from the heretic (religious) and radical (political) categories.

### Minimizing, Normalizing, and Moralizing Sexuality

Drawing from the “cultural toolkits” (Swidler 1986) of gay/lesbian culture and Christianity, lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming members used three group-specific strategies to construct and perform good Christian identities. While I treat these strategies as analytically distinct, members often drew on more than one in practice. First, some black lesbians *minimized* homosexuality by treating it as secondary to the Christian identity. Second, most lesbians and gay men—black and white—*normalized* their sexuality by enacting monogamy, manhood, or motherhood (this was the most common strategy). Third, some lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming members *moralized* the sexual-Christian identity: they defined themselves as more generous and moral than “condemning” Christians who excluded homosexuals. For a small number of black lesbians and gay men at Faith Church, this meant using their stigmatized sexuality as a basis for challenging homophobia in the church. Meanwhile, some white straight-but-affirming Unity members gleaned a special moral identity from their mission to include the excluded.

#### Minimizing

Members of mostly black, working class Faith Church were keenly aware of the image of homosexuality as abnormal and sinful. They believed that many heterosexuals in their communities, and even many black lesbians and gay men, dismissed “gay churches” as illegitimate. As Pastor Paula noted, to foreground sexuality was particularly discrediting in the black church, where talking about sex was taboo:

only once a month will the word “gay” come out of my mouth . . . When people come to church and hear something other than sex, sex, sex, they realize this is a real church, and gay people aren’t all about sex. Especially in our community, the black community, sex is not something you talk about in church. [In other black churches] you know the pastor’s got up with half the sisters in the front row, but it’s understood: you just don’t talk about it (interview).

Pastor Paula strove to present a good Christian image not only to her congregation, but also to black Christians who may disapprove of talk of sex or homosexuality. Pastor Paula routinely invoked the silence around sex and sexuality, common in black churches, to legitimize Faith Church and its members. She defined sexuality as separate from, and subordinate to, the core Christian self. An excerpt from one of her sermons typifies this message:

In my house, we worship the Lord. So if there’s anyone who still thinks their sexuality gets in the way of having a relationship with Jesus, you need to talk to me. Despite all the garbage people tell us, y’all, we’re Christians first and foremost . . . God loves us for who God made us to be, and our sexuality has nothing to do with that (field notes).

Members typically spoke of being lesbian or gay as how God made them to be, but here Pastor Paula uncoupled sexuality from the Christian identity. Why? By focusing on a relationship with Jesus—key to an evangelical Christian identity—she positioned Faith Church as a “real” church, and its members as “real” Christians. She deemed sexuality irrelevant, urging members to emphasize their faith in Jesus over all other identities.

A few black lesbian members minimized their lesbian identity by arguing that sexuality, like race, is irrelevant to one's character. When I asked Michelle, a 36-year-old black lesbian, if any Christian morals were important to her as a lesbian Christian, she said:

No, because . . . I like to keep the two separated. It's the same thing when people find out what church I go to. I'd like to see a point where people don't see it as a gay church, but just any other church. You know, if someone says, "I go to Baptist Rock," they don't think in terms of, that's a black church or a white church, or a gay church or a straight church, it's just a church (interview).

Michelle used color-blindness, as a parallel to sexuality-blindness, to ask that she be judged not by her race or sexuality, but by the content of her character (she added, "God loves me for being a Christian."). She moved sexuality and race to the background, defining herself as a Christian first. Fragmenting her race and sexuality from her core Christian identity enabled Michelle to deflect the stigma she faced as a black lesbian.

Though some black lesbians (e.g., Michelle and Pastor Paula) downplayed their race and sexuality, when I asked black lesbians in interviews which identity was most important to them, all but one considered race second to their Christian identity. As Joy, a 42-year-old black lesbian Faith Church member, testified in worship:

The first lessons I learned from my parents were, number one, I was black, and never to be ashamed of being black. Number two, people are gonna mistreat me because I'm black . . . I had to be strong . . . Being black was how I saw myself . . . sexuality came later, it wasn't as important (field notes).

Like many black women (King 1988), these black lesbians privileged race over other identities (e.g., gender and sexuality). Privileging the Christian identity lent them authenticity as black, while conferring them with the dignity and worth culturally associated with being a Christian. Insofar as many blacks regard black gays and lesbians as "selling out" to white gay culture (Cohen 1996; Greene 2000) and shaming "the race" (Giddings 1996; Griffin 2001), minimizing sexuality allowed black lesbians to construct and perform identities as both Christian and black. In a racially segregated context in which racism undermines the shared interests of black and white women, it is not surprising for black lesbians to seek solidarity not with other lesbian women, but with the black community. Members like Joy may also have viewed racial identity as more important than sexuality because their developmental awareness of race preceded that of sexual identity.

While these members minimized their sexual identities, they found comfort in the black lesbian community at Faith Church. They appreciated the cultural solidarity they found there, and the freedom to be open with their friends and lovers. It seemed that these members wanted to participate in a lesbian- and gay-affirming church, but rejected explicit talk about sex and sexuality, given the immoral meanings that homosexuality carried (recall Pastor Paula's assertion that "gay people aren't all about sex"). In addition to attending Faith Church, several black lesbians worshiped in traditional black Baptist or Pentecostal churches<sup>14</sup> where they were not "out" about their sexuality. This "double dipping," as one member dubbed it, helped them achieve dual goals: staying connected to the black community by attending a mainline church in the morning *and* "being who they were" by attending Faith Church in the afternoon. Seen in this way, these black lesbians resisted the imposition of a single sexual status, insisting on a complicated identity.

By minimizing homosexuality, black lesbians claimed dignity and worth as Christians. It is important to note, however, that this strategy defined lesbians as good Christians only within church walls. In the world outside, minimizing sexuality upheld a heterosexual assumption. Given deep-seated biblical prohibitions against same-sex activity, church members

14. Service was held on Sunday afternoon, and several black lesbian/gay parishioners also attended morning services at mainstream black Baptist or Pentecostal churches. I did not meet any white lesbian or gay Christians who attended mainstream white churches in addition to Faith or Unity Church.

would presumably have to remain celibate or hide their sexuality to be seen as Christians. Minimizing allowed black lesbians to accommodate to heteronormativity, the view that “heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and proscriptive social sexual arrangements” (Ingraham 1996:169). But it left the belief in homosexual sin unchallenged. Just as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues that women experience sexism differently by virtue of their race, black and white lesbians suffer the costs of heterosexism differently. These costs—which stemmed from their positions in systems of race, gender, and sexual inequality—help explain the divergent identity work of white and black lesbian church members. Specifically, white lesbians’ “whiteness” or belonging in a “white community” was not threatened by explicit talk of their sexuality. For at least some black lesbians, however, the cost of being ostracized from the black community seemed too high to challenge the institutional structures (e.g., heterosexual marriage) and cultural ideologies (e.g., homosexuality as sinful) that privilege heterosexuality in the culture.

### *Normalizing*

Most lesbian and gay members—black and white—*normalized* their sexual identities as part of who they were as Christians. This strategy was encapsulated on a t-shirt church members wore to an MCC conference: “Just your average Christian.” The majority of lesbian and gay members in both churches performed normal (“average”) Christian identities by invoking and enacting three biblical discourses: manhood (Faith Church), motherhood (Faith and Unity Churches), and monogamy (Faith and Unity Churches). Lesbian and gay members used this strategy to claim that they were “normal” in spite of their sexuality. In normalizing their sexuality, they challenged the Christian mantra “love the sinner, hate the sin”—they asked Christians to love the sinner, and to stop hating the “sin” of homosexual activity. At the same time, they claimed “normal” gender identities to resist the common stigma that lesbians and gay men are abnormally gendered (McIntosh 1968).

*Monogamous Relationships.* Both churches affirmed same-sex couples through holy union ceremonies, couples’ retreats, communion<sup>15</sup>, and prayer blessings. By constructing and performing monogamy, same-sex couples—with the support of their straight allies—both accommodated to *and* challenged a heterosexual definition of marriage.

Several white lesbians and gay men I interviewed at Unity Church viewed secular lesbian and gay communities as immoral. Attending a mostly straight-but-affirming church allowed them to be “who God made them to be” (as they put it) and live by Christian morals. For example, when I noted that some gays and lesbians reject Christianity because it condemns them, Patty, a 35-year-old-white lesbian Unity member, said:

Well, maybe they feel guilty, because it’s just like being heterosexual. If you’re gay, and you sleep around all the time, yeah, I have a problem with that, you know, in the community . . . A lot of lesbians do that, I have friends who do that, and I’m like, okay?! . . . I’m not a follower, I never have been (interview).

Patty interpreted my comment as a question of sexual behavior, not sexual orientation. She distanced herself from a promiscuous lesbian community and its sexual norms (“I’m not a follower, I never have been”), claiming a Christian identity by invoking her ten-year relationship with her female partner. In doing so, she challenged a definition of good Christian relationships as exclusively heterosexual, even as her claim to a normal Christian identity relied on an image of lesbians as “sleep[ing] around all the time.” Patty thus reinforced an image of promiscuous lesbians in order to construct a Christian identity inclusive of long-term same-sex couples.

15. At Faith Church, members could receive communion as a “family” with their partners and/or children (rather than strictly as individuals). Partnered members typically received communion and a prayer blessing as a couple.

Unity lesbians also did oppositional identity work by differentiating themselves from church members they saw as confirming the promiscuous stereotype. In an interview, I asked Grace, a 63-year-old white lesbian, if most Unity members were single or coupled. She said Unity was a “family church” and that most were “married.” She added:

But there is one [lesbian] woman who is always getting in different relationships with several different folks . . . I think people are concerned about her spiritual growth and would like to see her settle down with somebody . . . [I: What do pastors Beth and Gary think?] Well, they try not to be judgmental . . . we all do, but I think they’d like to see her take relationships more seriously (interview).

While I posed the question in sexuality-neutral terms, Grace pointed to a single lesbian instead of the many single heterosexuals she could have invoked. She symbolically resisted the definition of “marriage” as one-man-one-woman, which was the standard even within the church. Though she couched her disapproval in nonjudgmental language, she cast this single lesbian as lacking in spiritual maturity. It was not simply that this woman was nonmonogamous (“always getting in different relationships with several different folks”) but also that she was not mature in her relationship with Christ (“people are concerned about her spiritual growth and would like to see her settle down with somebody”). Like Patty (above), Grace challenged a heterosexual definition of marriage, normalizing monogamous lesbians and gay men by setting them off from those who have yet to “settle down” and become spiritually mature.

Images of lesbians in popular culture also offered foils against which white lesbians defined themselves as normal. In one group study of “Sexuality and the Bible,” Unity’s white lesbian associate pastor Rebecca gave an example of a lesbian couple who had come to her for pastoral counseling. During the counseling, one of the women disclosed that she was married to a man. Rebecca continued:

This happens more in same-sex couples than you’d think! I told them: “Your relationship is not an abomination because you are two women, but it *is* an abomination because you’re breaking the covenant one of you made before God!” Just like, I see a lot of people in serial relationships, hopping from one bed to the next, without concern for the person [someone in back shouts: “Anne (Heche) and Ellen (Degeneres)!” *Rebecca laughs*] Exactly! It’s not about same-sex or opposite-sex, it’s about treating your partner with love and respect (field notes).

In Rebecca’s view, the measure of a relationship is not gender, but the love and respect partners have for each other. By distinguishing lesbians in long-term relationships from lesbian bed-hoppers, Rebecca offered members a model for constructing and performing a lesbian Christian identity.

The white lesbians’ normalizing strategy emphasized their similarity to straight Christians and distanced them from the perceived promiscuity of the lesbian world. They accommodated to heteronormative notions of monogamy and marriage, while refusing to assimilate (e.g., through abstinence, heterosexuality, or “aversion therapy”). Much like some Mexican American students seek to dispel racist stereotypes through hard work and success while maintaining a distinctive cultural identity (Bettie 2003), these lesbians and gay men created a unique culture that supported monogamous relationships. They expanded of Christian community to include lesbian and gay Christians in monogamous, long-term relationships.

Black lesbians at Faith Church also valued monogamy, but performed it differently. When a group of black lesbian church leaders began to hold holy union ceremonies in 2001, I noted that the masculine-identified partner in these butch-fem couples was often congratulated for “turning in [their] player’s card.” At Faith Church, members referred to a group of six butch lesbians as the “mack daddies.”<sup>16</sup> This group shrank during my fieldwork; by 2001, only one

16. The mack daddy icon arose in 1970s “blackploitation” films and persists as a common metaphor in hip-hop culture. The mack daddy is a pimp-like figure (typically a man) who has many women at his disposal. Similarly, a “player” is a charming, hypermasculine man who engages in sex with many women.

mack daddy remained because all the others had held union ceremonies with their partners.<sup>17</sup> The mack daddies held honorary status at Faith Church because they embodied redemption. They served as testaments to how God, and the church, changes lives. For example, when I asked why she attended Faith Church, Stacy, a black lesbian church leader, said:

One way I know this church is so powerful is hearing how people have changed . . . when people talk about how God has moved in their life. You see that. Look at J.R. now. She's in a loving relationship with Barbara, she has a good woman who really loves her. You never would've thought it could happen—ten years ago she had so many women she could man a basketball team . . . She had a woman for every role on the team . . . she was out there mackin' and playin' people. But God put Barbara in her life. God has a way of doing that for people (interview).

With the support of their peers, the Faith Church mack daddies used gender bending to atone for “sinful” behaviors like “mackin’ and playin’ people.” They invoked a masculine trope with great currency in mainstream black culture—i.e., being saved from a “player’s life” by a “good woman”—to perform identities as good black Christians who were committed to the church and family (Boyd 1997; Kelley 1996). The mack daddy image normalized black lesbians as good Christians, in part, because it rooted their identities in black culture. It mapped their spiritual growth from a life of “running the streets” and “using people,” as J. R. put it in a testimony, to being “at peace.” These stories fit neatly into Elijah Anderson’s (1999) social class distinction between “street” and “decent.” The transformation from mack daddy to monogamous Christian was a way to claim a real *black* self, a self that was respectable and upwardly mobile according to common understandings of upward mobility in the culture. It also echoed Collins’s (2005) contention that many black communities view strong black men (or honorary men) as the solution to their problems.

By performing butch-fem monogamy, black lesbians creatively subverted a biblical gender order based on male-female complementarity. By modeling their relationships on a masculine leader/provider and a feminine nurturer/helper, they defined themselves as monogamous and normally gendered. At the same time, the mack daddies—not their “good woman” partners—were singled out and celebrated for being monogamous. Black lesbians who “did” a feminine or androgynous style could not draw on the mack daddy trope as readily. Members viewed the mack daddies’ fem-performing partners as “good”—loving, nurturing—women whose duty it was to reign in and redeem the butches. By performing identities as “honorary men,” then, the mack daddies challenged a *biological* view of male headship as natural. But they reinforced femininity as subordinate: the value of a good woman depended on her relationship with an (honorary) man (Wilkins 2007). The “reformed player” narrative thus cemented masculine privilege: only the masculine-performing butches got extra points for doing monogamy and settling down. The fem “good women” were only doing what was expected of them.

There is considerable debate in feminist theory as to whether gender bending reinforces (e.g., Lorber 1994, 2005; Lucal 1999) or challenges (e.g., Halberstam 1998) gender and sexual inequality. In these churches, it seemed to do both. On the one hand, the mack daddies challenged a dominant view of butch lesbians as deviant (Davis and Kennedy 1992) and of same-sex couples as unnatural. This identity performance threw a wrench in the sex/gender/desire continuum (Butler 1990) that cements the “natural” heterosexual order. By breaking the link between male/female sex and hetero/homo desire, butch black lesbians challenged a notion of masculinity as the exclusive domain of biological males. On the other hand, the performance of masculinity conferred butch lesbians with a superiority that reinforced masculine privilege because higher status was not afforded to fem lesbians. Given Faith Church members’ belief that men are God’s chosen leaders of the church and family (discussed later), gender bending

17. The last remaining mack daddy said in an interview that members often passed her notes during service to ask when she and her partner of six months were getting married. She saw this as flattering, but didn’t feel “ready” to have a holy union.



both challenged heteronormativity and reinforced a two-gender system that devalues the feminine. Also, while gender bending legitimated butch lesbians as leaders and providers inside the church, it may not have helped them appear normal outside church walls.

Faith Church's Pastor Paula also drew on cultural meanings and symbols associated with masculinity to accommodate (but not assimilate) her lesbian relationship to a male-female, pastor-pastor's wife model. Like the mack daddies, this butch-fem performance legitimated her as a lesbian pastor: she was the leader of her family, and her church, with a good woman as her "backbone." Church members referred to her partner, Wendy, as "the pastor's wife" or the "first spouse." They often recognized Wendy as a "good woman" who was willing to sacrifice her interests for the pastor's career. Wendy sang in the choir, but told a local newspaper reporter that she chose not to serve in leadership, though she was able, because she was the "pastor's wife." Pastor Paula wore pants suits or robes when she preached<sup>18</sup>; Wendy always wore dresses or skirts to church (but rarely outside it), accentuating her femininity. Arranging their "expressive equipment" (Goffman 1959) in conventionally gendered ways helped Pastor Paula to "do" a symbolically masculine pastoral identity because she had a good woman as her helper.

In private, I often heard Wendy voice frustration with the burdens of being a pastor's wife.<sup>19</sup> In public, however, she upheld an image as an upright Christian woman who put her own interests and needs second to those of the pastor. Associate Pastor Rebecca at Unity did not (in interviews or church services) perform masculinity, nor did her partner act as a feminine "pastor's wife" (though Rebecca and her partner frequently cited the fact that they had held a holy union). Considering the emphasis on supporting women clergy and combating sexism in the UCC, a masculine performance would likely have seemed out of place for Associate Pastor Rebecca. Nor did the white lesbians at Unity *need* to play up their masculinity, because their whiteness gave them a respect and "normal" status that is denied to black lesbians in a racist society. For Pastor Paula, a masculine clergy identity seemed to confer legitimacy as a normally gendered (i.e., masculine) pastor in the black (heterosexual) Christian world. Masculinity conferred respect, bringing her closer to being a "real" pastor even though she was female.

Monogamy lent same-sex couples normal and moral status, but threatened Faith Church's "inclusive" identity and reinstated hierarchies among sexual minorities as a group. This came to light when Se'von, a butch black lesbian, attended church in April 2001 with two fem-performing black women dressed in black, who were ostensibly her lovers. Wearing leather collars etched with the moniker "love slave," they accompanied her arm in arm. Se'von had been an active member during Faith Church's early years (1997 through 1999), when she served as the sound system manager and held a union ceremony at the church with a previous partner. I had heard members express disapproval of her during that time (many found her "crazy" and "attention-seeking"), but this reappearance was particularly dramatic because she hadn't attended church for over a year.

Se'von's appearance constituted an ethnomethodological test of the group's inclusive identity. Pastor Paula welcomed Se'von as the threesome entered the church foyer. Some members shot each other confused or disapproving looks as they spotted her "love slaves;" others acknowledged her with nods or handshakes. The respect vanished when Se'von and her partners stepped into the communion line toward the end of service. It was customary for the Pastor to bless couples and families (in addition to individuals) in communion at Faith Church. But when Se'von approached the altar with her lovers, members shifted uncomfortably

18. In part because the Unity pastors dressed in pastoral robes, clothing was not a resource they used to perform gender identities (though pastoral robes clearly signified a clergy identity).

19. At house parties, regional conferences, and Pride events, I often traveled in members' private worlds. When Wendy attended these events alone, she always expressed relief from the pressure to "represent" herself as the pastor's wife, even though she affirmed her love for Pastor Paula.



in their seats and looked at one another with raised eyebrows. Pastor Paula offered them communion and a distinctly rushed prayer.

The three then moved to the left to receive a prayer blessing from a lay leader; she turned her head to avoid them. Seeing this, Se'von shuffled her lovers over to the next lay leader in line. That lay leader paused, looking to Pastor Paula for direction. She gave them a short blessing, avoiding physical contact. At the end of service, Se'von and her partners exited quickly; rudely (in Faith's church culture), she hurried her lovers out the door without lining up to greet Pastor Paula. As I sat with members at the potluck, there seemed to be an awkward silence. Finally, a black lesbian at the table said, "I guess they're right, we just gonna do whatever: homosexuality, polygamy, bestiality!" A black lesbian church leader responded: "You talkin' bout the love slaves? That is *not* who we are. *That* was just some drama." The use of a "slave" image in a black church was likely part of the reason members took offense. Still, the importance of monogamy to members' collective identity as normal and moral was striking. Faith Church celebrated its "inclusive" identity, but multiple partners (especially "love slaves") were not acceptable. Se'von's identity performance seemed to stain the normal and morally respectable image Faith Church members strove to uphold.

Same-sex couples received support in these churches that the heterosexual world lacks (Weston 1991). By recognizing same-sex relationships, church members redefined heterosexual monogamy—and made a symbolic claim for marriage—to include same-sex couples. However, using monogamy to be normal and moral meant being only selectively inclusive. Particularly in the Southern Bible Belt, for lesbian and gay Christians to be inclusive of sexual practices such as sado-masochism (SM) and polyamory clearly violated the boundary of a good Christian.

*Manhood.* Some working class black gay men at Faith Church normalized their homosexuality by "doing" Christian manhood; and for their part, many black lesbians encouraged their performance. In contrast, the white upper middle class gay men at Unity never claimed male headship. This reflected both the institutional context (the UCC rejects male headship as unbiblical) and members' social locations. Whereas working class black gay men are denied many of the privileges of masculinity by their class, race, and sexuality (Anderson 1999; Majors and Billson 1992), the white middle class gay men at Unity came closer to (hetero)normal because of the moral and cultural currency their high-paying jobs, monogamous relationships, and whiteness offered.

In 1999, Pastor Paula often asked Leonard, a black gay man ordained in the Holiness Church, to preach. After the Columbine shootings, he gave the following sermon:

Everywhere you look—even here at Faith Church, y'all—men are not taking up the battle, we're not being soldiers of the Lord. The Bible tells us men have to be the providers, no matter whether we're gay or bisexual or heterosexual, we're supposed to be the leaders of the family and the church . . . Men aren't doing their part, and our families are falling apart. When I was coming up, it never would've crossed my mind to shoot someone, or even touch that gun, because my daddy was 6 foot 6 inches tall and he would of killed me . . . he would of brought me back and shot me again, just to teach me a lesson (field notes).

Invoking biblical literalism, Leonard asserted a normal Christian identity as a gay man. He included gay and bisexual men within a biblical notion of male headship, normalizing gay and bisexual black men as heads of household and leaders of the church. It is important to note that this sermon was situated in the wider cultural discourse of the "crisis of the black male" (Anderson 1999) and black family "pathology" (Moynihan 1965). Seen in this way, Leonard strove to redeem black men, regardless of sexuality, as good Christians and real men. He distanced himself from stereotypes of black (heterosexual) men as lazy and irresponsible and black gay and bisexual men as traitors of the black family and community (Hutchinson 2001; Cohen 1996). In addition, he implicitly critiqued the white middle class school shooters as

displaying an improper masculinity—one that disrespected adult male authority. In this way, he creatively constructed a real black masculinity that included gay and bisexual black men and rejected a white middle class norm.

The dominant masculinity that Leonard valorized left little room for black lesbians to craft a positive identity. Black women and lesbians are not only excluded from leadership in many white circles, but their leadership in black communities and black churches has been constrained by the belief that black men are the natural leaders and representatives of the race (Collins 2000; hooks 1992). Some scholars (e.g., Cole and Guy-Scheftall 2003; Douglas 1999) regard the continuing belief in male headship as a response to the racist assault on black men. This may help us to unpack black lesbians' seemingly ironic support for a belief in "natural" male headship. In response to Leonard's sermon, many of the black lesbians in attendance called out "Amen," and "Preach, brother!" They gave Leonard a standing ovation. When I asked Yvette, a 42-year-old black lesbian church leader, what she thought of the sermon, she said:

I support any brother who's called to preach in this church. I think a lot of brothers are intimidated by all these women. [What do you think of him saying men are supposed to be the leaders and providers?] Well, the Bible does say that. There's no gettin' around it (field notes).

While church members challenged a literal interpretation of homosexuality as sinful, Leonard, Yvette, and others left a biblical reading of men as heads of household and church intact. Their gendered and raced performance of "normal" Christian identity emerged in a social context where many black communities seek to restore the "absent" black man in the church and family (Lincoln 1965; Staples 1999). Privileging black men showed that black lesbians were not man-haters (Pharr 1988), but normal black women who, as members proclaimed in worship, "love their brothers." The assumption seemed to be that supporting black men would uplift the entire black community, including black women.

The changing demographics of Faith Church—which was about 30 percent male and 90 percent black in 1998, and almost 100 percent female and 30 percent white by 2001—likely contributed to this response. When Leonard delivered this sermon, Faith Church had lost most of its male members. Many of the black gay men who attended early on in the church's history now attended a largely white gay male church nearby (where Pastor Paula had formerly served as a lay pastor). Only one black gay man remained from Faith Church's founding, and less than five men attended service weekly. As in some black student organizations (Kolb 2007), the flight of black men threatened the church's legitimacy in the eyes of outsiders and members alike. Pastor Paula said, "We serve the whole community . . . without men, people don't see us as a real church." As a result, members often discussed how to attract more (black gay) men. When I asked black men why they preferred the mostly gay male church, some mentioned dating prospects; others said going to a church where they could see images of themselves felt "right." In contrast, several black lesbians I interviewed blamed women who "had issues with men" or were "not welcoming" for driving black gay men out of church. One member exclaimed in an interview, "some people don't like men, and if they don't, they can just get out!"

I never heard the white lesbians at Unity blame one another for man-hating or dividing the community. Again, this was consistent with Unity Church's support for gender equality *and* members' social identities. Unlike Faith Church, which was mostly black lesbian and losing men rapidly, Unity Church was about 40 percent white heterosexual male. The few black gay men who still attended Faith Church were working class and gay identified. They confronted symbolic and material barriers that white heterosexual and white gay men at Unity did not: as working class gay black men, they were seen as needing support to take responsibility as leaders of the church and the race. For many at Faith Church, being "normal" Christians meant defending black manhood *and* the racial authenticity of black gays and lesbians. It seemed that white Unity Church lesbians had more freedom to challenge male authority because they didn't have to defend their (white) brothers.

Faith Church members also normalized homosexuality by discouraging "feminine" behaviors in men. Just as members privileged masculine-performing lesbians, they encouraged

black gay men to enact conventional masculinity. For example, Pastor Paula labeled Ralph, the only black gay man remaining from Faith Church's founding advisory board, a "queen." She often teased Ralph for not being "butch." For example, as I chatted with Pastor Paula and Ralph after a service in 1999, Ralph went to get a plate of food. Pastor Paula said, "Look at him—he's such a woman!" She called to him, "Walk like a man, Ralph!" At another service, she applauded Ralph for working on a Habitat for Humanity project. She turned to the congregation and said, "You never thought Ralph could be butch, did you?" Though she made these comments in jest, she still reinforced the idea that to act "like a woman" was inferior. Pastor Paula supported women's leadership and was critical of the sexism she faced at the hands of male pastors, but she valorized the same masculinity that marked her—as a black lesbian woman—an illegitimate pastor. Policing Ralph's gender display brought his "queenness" (i.e., effeminate gayness) in line with conventional masculinity and projected a more legitimate image of the church. Having "real men" as leaders in the church, it seemed, would make Faith Church more respectable in the eyes of black heterosexual Christians.

*Motherhood.* White lesbians mobilized "family values," a discourse with considerable moral currency in Southern religion and politics (and the culture at large), to normalize their sexuality. Invoking and enacting "good mother" identities allowed them to accommodate to the "Christian family" while resisting its heterosexual exclusivity (Lewin 1993). Although the few gay men in the churches did not make claims to fatherhood, they supported white lesbians' "good mother" performances.

In U.S. culture, as in Christianity, "mother" is a moral identity; it confers moral worth on those who enact it (McMahon 1995). But not all women have the resources to achieve this. As a result, white middle class heterosexual married women are more likely than others to be seen as worthy (McMahon 1995; Solinger 2000). Black single mothers, on the other hand, are often blamed for the decline of the black community (Kaplan 1997). Further, the ideology of "intensive mothering"—which urges mothers to devote "large quantities of money . . . professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy" (Hays 1996:4) to child rearing—sets up an ideal that only middle and upper class mothers can afford. It was in this context that white middle class lesbian couples—whose race and class privileges brought them closest to this cultural ideal of the "good mother"—invoked motherhood. Working class black lesbians, many of whom were single and had children from previous heterosexual relationships, *never* invoked motherhood to define themselves as normal Christians.

White lesbians drew on their unmarked (Phelan 1993) identities as white and middle class to define themselves as "good mothers" despite being lesbian. When I asked how she thought church members viewed her, Peggy, a 42-year-old white lesbian at Unity, said:

We have a great family, our family is kind of different than everybody else's, but we have the same struggles, the same trials, and the same joys any other family with a four-year-old has. And I think that's how we're seen in the church, as just another family with a young child. It doesn't matter that we have two moms, which I think is great (interview).

Similarly, Bill, a 35-year-old white gay man, recalled what attracted him to Unity:

The first Sunday we went we met a lesbian couple who had a little kid, we were talking to them after church when this elderly couple came up, what I would stereotype as not being comfortable with this lesbian couple. But they said, "How you doing, how's the little one, it's great to see you," and I was like "Wow! This place is really integrated." That's what made us come back (interview).

White gay men and lesbians at Unity noted repeatedly in interviews how "impressive" and "wonderful" it was that lesbian mothers were accepted by heterosexuals in the church. The performance of motherhood thus normalized white lesbians as good Christian women, while signaling that gays and lesbians, as a group, moved in the mainstream of church life.

Like the white lesbians at Unity, white lesbians at predominantly black Faith Church normalized their lesbian identities by invoking their status as mothers, or soon-to-be-mothers. In August 2002, members invited a white lesbian couple to church to celebrate their son's baptism. Pastor Paula spoke of the trials this couple had faced in adopting the child from Guatemala:

We know this child is blessed. He had prayer warriors to get him here. They believed in the power of prayer, y'all! They put their hearts and souls on the line to ask God to send him. His mothers, and people in this church, prayed 24/7, without fail, to get him here safe and sound. His mothers loved God so much, and God blessed them (field notes).

These white lesbians had never attended Faith Church, and did not attend any other church. Yet their status as white middle class monogamous mothers seemed to give them immediate normal and moral legitimacy. Additionally, two other white middle class lesbian couples regularly thanked God for their children during the "prayers and praises" part of service at Faith Church. These church members thus resisted a heterosexual definition of the "good mother" to include white middle class lesbian couples who could afford in-vitro fertilization or international adoption (Boggis 2001).

In my three years of fieldwork—after such claims had become scripted in the church discourse—black lesbians *never* invoked motherhood as a moral identity. This was all the more striking in light of the value and recognition accorded to mothers in many black communities (Collins 2000). Even on Mother's Day, black lesbians testified about the strength and sacrifices of their own mothers (not themselves). Perhaps their status as black single mothers, which can signify a moral failure of the black community, explains their distancing from the identity of "mother" (Kaplan 1997). Lacking the resources to accomplish a good mother identity, they sought other ways to signify their worth.

The only time a black lesbian referenced her identity as a mother during my fieldwork was when confessing to feeling like a "bad" mother. Vera, a single black lesbian in her late 30s, testified about the hardships she faced as a single mother:

They say love makes a family, and that's really nice, but money holds a family together. With my boys, I never felt I could raise 'em right . . . they needed a man in their lives . . . Anyone who knows me will tell you I love my kids more than life itself, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was a bad mother. I was a single mother, working at Wal-Mart, doing what I could to support them . . . I did things I'll always regret. I gave my kids up 'cause I thought [other family members] could take care of 'em better than I could . . . But God worked it out, thank you Jesus (field notes)!

Vera's testimony makes sense in a culture that paints single black mothers as unworthy. She claimed victory in regaining custody of her kids, but her narrative highlights the material and cultural barriers that many women—especially poor, black, single, and/or lesbian—face to being seen as good mothers. Normalizing white middle class lesbian couples as good mothers masked the social, financial, and legal structures and norms that deny many same-sex parents (especially those without money) recognition as worthy parents—and in some cases exclude them from parenting at all. In addition, it relied on a traditional notion of femininity that bases women's worth on domesticity, nurturing, and reproduction (Hays 1996; Hochschild 1989).

### *Moralizing*

A few black lesbians and gay men at Faith Church, and white straight-but-affirming members at Unity, *moralized* their sexuality. They claimed that their sexuality—lesbian, gay, or straight—gave them a special calling as Christians. Much like some gay men living with HIV/AIDS redefine their disease from a "curse" to a "blessing" by becoming HIV/AIDS educators and activists (Sandstrom 1990), some black lesbians and gay men at Faith Church saw in their stigmatized sexuality a mission to save lesbian/gay souls. Being a straight "ally" also lent

moral authority for white heterosexuals at Unity: like heterosexual parents who “ennoble” themselves as especially generous and loving advocates for their gay or lesbian children (Fields 2001), Unity’s heterosexual co-pastors and some straight-but-affirming members claimed a special calling, as straight allies, to make Christianity more inclusive.

A small number of black lesbians and gay men at Faith Church believed they were “called” to fight homophobia within Christianity. In a 1999 sermon, Rev. Howard Edgerton, a black gay Baptist minister who guest-preached at Faith Church five times during my fieldwork, announced his “crusade” to end prejudice against gay men living with HIV/AIDS. He prefaced his sermon by saying:

Even though I’m not a member of Faith Church, I’m a member in spirit. It’s so wonderful to be in a church where I don’t have to leave my sexuality at the door. That’s what this church is all about . . . Because society has oppressed us . . . for so long, we finally had enough and started a place of our own . . . where nobody can tell us we’re not God’s children . . . we are God’s children, y’all, and I venture to say that we might even be God’s chosen ones (field notes).

Rev. Howard distinguished Faith Church from conservative churches (including his own Baptist Church) where he had to “leave [his] sexuality at the door.” He suggested that Faith Church and its members were “chosen” to create an authentic Christian community “where nobody can tell us we’re not God’s children.”

Church members responded to this message with far less enthusiasm than they had to Rev. Howard’s previous sermons. At the post-service potluck, a black lesbian said, “Is that dude on a mission or what? I’m gay and I’m proud!” Another black lesbian replied: “I like to hear him preach, but tone it down a few notches, brother!” Pastor Paula, too, saw Rev. Howard (her longtime friend and colleague), as “too gay.”<sup>20</sup> When I asked in an interview what she thought of his sermon, she said, “when people get up there and preach about gay, gay, gay, it takes away from [our focus, which is to] worship God.” Though I observed Rev. Howard at church twice after this sermon, he was never invited to preach again. In light of Pastor Paula’s minimizing approach, Rev. Howard’s attempt to attach a special moral calling to homosexuality seemed improper in her eyes.

Erika, a black lesbian in her late 20s, also did oppositional identity work by moralizing her sexuality. She claimed a moral identity by ennobling her integrated lesbian-Christian identity. In August of 1998, she testified that God had called her to leave her home in the Deep South to embark on a faith journey. From my field notes:

I was stifled in my hometown . . . God told me I couldn’t find my calling [there] . . . I was like David, an outcast of the community. God told me to go out on faith. I had to find a place where I could do what He was calling me to do . . . everything happens for a reason. I knew right away, y’all, this [church] was where God was calling me to go—I had to get away from the prejudice and the drama so I could find my calling as a preacher [and] let people know that being gay is a blessing.

Erika claimed a moral identity by teaching other lesbian and gay Christians that being gay is not an abomination, but a “blessing.” She suggested that Faith Church was more authentically Christian than her intolerant home community, and that her identity as a lesbian Christian gave her a mission to promote acceptance and save other lesbian/gay Christians from outcast status.

Erika, Rev. Edgerton, and two other members I interviewed defined their sexual marginalization as grounds for a special moral identity. They imbued their homosexuality with a moral mission to build God’s beloved community on earth. But most members, especially the pastor and church leaders, rejected the moralizing strategy. For example, after Erika publicly announced

20. The resistance of Pastor Paula and church members to Rev. Edgerton’s sermon may have also been related to his more (religiously) charismatic and “feminine” style than the traditionally “masculine” image that Pastor Paula favored.



her wish to become Pastor Paula's assistant, Pastor Paula and several church leaders openly referred to her as "crazy." Pastor Paula kept Erika at an arm's length, at least in part, because her attempts to highlight homosexuality might jeopardize their acceptance in the black heterosexual world. While moralizing constituted an identity work strategy for a few Faith Church members, it was more important because it exposed the collective boundary of a normal Christian that members took for granted. Like church members' disapproval of Se'von and her love slaves, their rejection of the homosexual moralizers showed the limits of their "inclusive" ideal. Building a Christian identity on the similarities between Christians—lesbian, gay, and straight—led to the exclusion of church members who advanced homosexuality as a basis for moral identity.

Back at Unity Church, the white straight-but-affirming members faced a "courtesy stigma" (Goffman 1963) through their association with the "sinful" identity and behavior of gay and lesbian members. Members believed that the homosexual stigma had led to the dissolution of the (mostly white heterosexual) choir's alliance with a nearby black (heterosexual) UCC church. Before Unity Church's decision to become lesbian and gay affirming, white members had traveled with the black choir members to perform in the United States and abroad. Because Unity's identity was rooted in "inclusivity" and "diversity," their failure to attract more than a smattering of people of color reflected, for many, a failure to "practice what they preached." The interracial gospel choir helped Unity members and the co-pastors to manage this contradiction. In an interview, I asked co-pastor Gary if he thought the few members of color ever felt like tokens. He said:

seemingly over the last few years we have a few more people of color attending . . . the wonderful thing is, for example, the relationship with the [the interracial gospel choir], that's just a great relationship, and at times I know that, people come in, and then folks from [the black church] will leave after singing, but when we've traveled together, it's really been a wonderful experience. I don't think people think it's tokenism [laughs].

As Gary mentioned, members of the black church still sang at Unity's services, but left immediately after the opening hymns. And members no longer performed together outside of service. When I asked a white heterosexual choir member what happened, she said: "They've pretty much disowned us. They thought we were fringe before, but the [lesbian- and gay-affirming decision] really put us out there, like we were heretics or radicals."

The leadership at Unity, especially the head co-pastors, countered the perception that they were "heretics or radicals" by defining lesbian and gay inclusion as an act of Christian love, true to Jesus's example, not a rejection of Christian tradition or a political position. They depoliticized lesbian and gay inclusion by highlighting Unity members' special calling to include those who were "different." In framing inclusion as a moral (not a political) act, they urged straight members to include gays and lesbians as an act of Christian charity. In a sermon in August of 2001, head co-pastor Gary preached:

When we recognize our gay brothers or lesbian sisters, does it make heterosexuality any less intense or exciting or confusing? When we recognize black achievement, does it diminish white achievement? When we translate drivers' tests into Spanish, does it make the test any more difficult for English speakers? Jesus's New Covenant teaches us that . . . we must nourish the self-assurance and self-knowledge of others.

Gary encouraged members to include those marginalized by sexuality, race, or culture. His appeal that members *include* nonhetero, nonwhite, non-English speaking groups showed who constituted "we" in the church. In this and other sermons, he routinely used language that situated white middle class English-speaking heterosexuals as the normative group. By implication, it was the white heterosexual majority who received bonus points for including the marginalized, not the groups worth "recogniz[ing]."

Similarly, some straight-but-affirming members came forward to publicly affirm gays and lesbians. For example, after lesbian associate pastor Rebecca testified during Lent about



her struggle to accept her calling as a lesbian pastor, a heterosexual white woman stood up to say:

I give thanks and praise for this church, because I've been a member of exclusive churches, Baptist churches, holier-than-thou churches, my whole life. Thank you God . . . for leading me to a church that accepts everyone. I give all the thanks and praise to you, Jesus, for helping me and my husband become living examples of your love and grace.

Attaching a moral calling to heterosexual inclusion both challenged and reinforced heteronormativity. These Unity members took brave and progressive steps to combat homophobia in the church. But because members of dominant groups in our society (e.g., heterosexuals, whites) are not taught to recognize their privileges, or to see their ability to "include" others as a product of this privilege, church members failed to see that only privileged groups earned bonus points for being inclusive. Claiming a moral mission to include the "other" is less workable for groups already defined as other in our society (e.g., lesbian and gay Unity and Faith Church members).

At times, Unity co-pastors Gary and Beth also reinforced a deviant image of lesbians and gay men. Thirty-nine-year-old white lesbian Unity member Debra recalled a baptism in which co-pastor Beth likened gays and lesbians to social undesirables. She said in an interview:

In a Baptism for the baby of a lesbian couple . . . [co-pastor] Beth used an example of . . . a kid being really smelly and undesirable in the classroom, speaking to all the people in the world who struggle with people who are different from them, but it was that revolting kind of "we" and "them," you know the marginalized are dirty, and there's been far more of that in the last year, and that's been really hard.

Debra was the only church member I interviewed who critiqued inequalities in the language, beliefs, and practices at Unity Church. Most lesbians and gay men saw any mention of homosexuality as an improvement over other churches. Eric, a 37-year-old white gay Unity member, said:

One example I remember was dealing with the drug dealers and criminals, the terrorists, the bisexuals, gay, lesbian, transgender people, you know, we should be loving and accepting of all people. I'll never forget when they said that . . . the actuality that gay and lesbian was used on the pulpit in a context that was not damning was like, "Whoa! Miraculous!" (interview).

Eric perceived the pastor's lack of condemnation as "miraculous." Perhaps because he and others wanted so deeply to belong in Christian community—to be seen as normal Christians—they were blind to language that marked them less worthy than heterosexuals (note the analogy of LGBT with drug dealers, criminals, and terrorists).

## Conclusion

These lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming Christians struggled to alter deep-seated beliefs and practices that defined heterosexuality as the index of a good Christian man or woman. In these churches, many lesbians and gay men found new families that accepted them, bringing them back into God's universal family. With this belonging they felt healed of the suffering and rejection that had burdened them. Thus, these church members created new possibilities for a Christian way of life in which homosexuality was seen as natural, normal, and potentially moral.

Both churches were committed to including all persons in community and challenging racism, sexism, poverty, and homophobia. But being inclusive, as a group ideal, was difficult if not impossible to achieve because church members' construction and performance of good Christian identities was enmeshed in race, class, gender, and sexual meanings and

hierarchies in the church and society. For example, by essentializing sexuality and defining its expression as proper only in two forms—hetero- or homosexual monogamy—members made the churches less inclusive to bisexuals, transgender people, and gender and sexual nonconformists who seek freedom from sexual roles and hierarchies. As well, family values discourses are encoded with race and class assumptions that may not be fully inclusive of lesbians and gay men who, by virtue of their race and/or class identities, can accommodate less easily to a white middle class ideal of parenting and family (Collins 2000). These findings call us to reconsider claims that religion constitutes a framework for practicing inclusion (Yip 2002). Seen through an intersectional lens that examines race, gender, sexuality, and Christianity together, the limits of inclusion and normalizing for social equality come into sharper focus.

These findings also call “inclusivity” itself into question on two levels. First, discourses around inclusivity characteristically imply that one group (the socially privileged) should accept another group (the others). This reinscribes the subordination of the others by framing them as in need of help and approval and gives credit for the act of inclusion to the privileged group. In part, this is a result of how “unmarked” categories (Phelan 1993) such as whiteness, class privilege, and heterosexuality work as almost invisible forms of power and resources that can reproduce the privileges of dominant groups in our society. To avoid this trap, discourses of inclusivity might explicitly recognize and challenge the social institutions that confer privilege on some groups and not others (e.g., groups that challenge white privilege). Second, church members’ inclusive ideal created an expectation that they would include and affirm all people in community. This was perhaps impossible to do in practice. Most churches, including these, promote morals and standards about what is acceptable—they do not welcome everyone or affirm all behaviors. The inclusive ideal made it difficult for church leaders to enforce the Christian morals and standards they valued without being seen as hypocritical (i.e., not “inclusive”). Church members were sincere in their desire to include all and to create safe spaces of freedom, equality, and acceptance. But when inclusivity appeared to threaten core traditions, morals, or beliefs, inclusivity took a back seat to church authority. And perhaps rightly so. Christian communities rely on the creation and maintenance of boundaries; churches are not a place where anything goes.

Faith-based constructions of homosexuality and LGBT rights are gaining popularity as a way to reclaim “moral values” from the conservative right. For example, advocates for marriage equality argue that the legalization of same-sex marriage will expand family values to include all regardless of sexual orientation, thereby integrating lesbians and gay men in mainstream culture (e.g., Sullivan 1995). Likewise, many lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming members of these churches implicitly or explicitly mobilized a discourse of family values to argue for lesbian and gay inclusion in Christianity. But the normalizing strategy they favored relied on conventionally gendered discourses and practices grounded in white middle class respectability: monogamy, manhood, and motherhood. These findings indicate that normalizing lesbian/gay identity through a moral discourse of “family values” may not liberate all lesbians and gay men equally. Instead, it seems to benefit those already closest to the mainstream (Cohen 1997). This matters not only for understanding how faith shapes the construction of homosexuality as a social problem, but also for political strategizing in the struggle for LGBT rights. Lesbian and gay liberation can never be achieved without challenging racism, sexism, and class inequalities.

To fully understand sexual-religious identity negotiation, we must analyze the other identities that shape people’s lives. Considering race, gender, religion, and sexuality together reveals the necessity of putting intersectional frameworks into practice empirically. As intersectional scholars have shown, when groups challenge one boundary (e.g., sexuality) they may reinforce others (e.g., gender and race) (e.g., Wilkins 2007). Participant observation will be a crucial tool in understanding how this quandary plays out, and how it might be solved, among diverse groups in a range of social contexts.

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