

Article

Congregational Discernment: One Church Case Study

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Abstract: This case study reflects the congregational practices of members and staff within a congregation in the southwest of the United States which self-identifies as a congregation within the Christian tradition. The congregation has completed processes and procedures that resulted in the congregation self-identifying as a welcoming and affirming congregation to all people. A Master of Social Work intern was embedded for an academic year, as her field internship experience, in the congregation as part of the ministerial staff. The intern examined congregational and denominational processes that included difficult conversations, daily practices, and decisions with specific reference to LGBTQI+ issues as part of a national research study of Christian congregations determining inclusivity in their membership, governance, and leadership functions. The case study included participant-observation by the intern of the lived experiences of church leadership and members as a result of these conversations and decisions specific to the practices of a congregation with membership of approximately 700 people. Findings included a decision for affirmation and inclusion that resulted in the congregation being discharged from the denomination. There was significant impact on the ministry including the loss of membership and finances. Additionally, ministries of inclusion are enhanced as formerly marginalized populations are now central to the congregation.

Keywords: church; congregation; LGBTQI+; inclusion; welcoming; affirming; gender

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Christian church, approximately 2000 years ago, discussions about inclusion of people who have been considered the “other” have been ongoing. These discussions historically included that of Jewish people and Gentiles. There are parallels in today’s culture with the discussion around inclusion of people in the LGBTQI+ community. Some denominations have decided to have this conversation of inclusion with their congregations and some have not. Some have chosen inclusion; others have not. The motivations and processes are diverse and often challenging. [Nouwen \(2013\)](#) defines discernment as a spiritual practice designed to understand God’s word and direction to God’s people. In Nouwen’s book, Christensen and Laird clarify that Nouwen found spiritual discernment to be complex, interconnected, and leading to knowing God’s will. That definition helps define the discernment processes of congregations specific to the complex challenges of the church and reinforces the importance of examining those. The commonalities and differences in the discernment process can be instructive to others who engage in discernment processes for their respective congregations. This article reports on one congregation’s complex and important discernment process around the role and position of LGBTQI+ persons in their fellowship.

1.1. Research Setting

The church that was the focus for this case study is centrally located in the heart of downtown in a large, Southwestern city. The church describes itself as “a people’s cathedral, inviting all persons,

nurturing one another, and serving in adventuresome obedience to Jesus Christ” (pastor website 2019). The congregation was founded by a scholarly missionary in 1847 and was instrumental in the early years in innovative programming that was foundational to the denomination. The city grew up around the church whose members decided to remain a downtown church and expanded its facilities there over the years. The church history includes identification with moderate positions on civil rights, women’s rights, and social justice (Brooks 1923). This is the context into which the congregation, which already included LGBTQI+ members, entered a discernment process in response to the nomination of a gay person as deacon.

The congregation engaged in a deliberate conversation many years ago about LGBTQI+ inclusion, membership, and leadership; the decision of the church was to become “welcoming and affirming of all people of every race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, physical and mental ability, nationality, and economic station to thrive in the full life of our community” (Statement of Diversity 2014). The membership roll includes approximately 700 people with 200–300 active participants in Sunday worship service and small group bible studies. Wednesday night services typically have approximately 60 people in attendance. This was the context for the church’s on-going conversations.

The church history and mission around social justice and reconciliation has continued to inform the hiring of pastoral and church staff. The discussion regarding LGBTQI+ leadership and full benefits of membership began with a strategic planning process that acknowledges that practices of inclusion had preceded church conversation and policy. The pastor, who had already resigned for another pastorate, preached several sermons on the scripture and homosexuality and during the subsequent interim pastorate, the church initiated a discernment process with a study team of church leaders and congregants. This resulted in a diversity statement that all people are welcome and fully included in the church.

1.2. Significance of Study

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to observe and participate in the lived experiences of staff and membership resulting from the congregation’s discernment process and decision to become a welcoming and affirming congregation. The ethnographer, a social work intern, observed the impact on leadership, membership, and worship during weekly interactions in the church. While there is literature about other controversial societal and congregational issues like abortion (Huang et al. 2016), women in leadership (Diehl and Dzubinski 2016), and divorce (Glass and Levchak 2014), there is less literature about discernment processes for LGBTQI+ conversations and decisions or about the variables that affect positive or negative outcomes for the congregations who are engaging in them. The question of sexual orientation and/or identity is one of division and policy challenge in American society at large and in denominations and churches in particular. With the recent decision of the Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage (Fisher et al. 2018), many churches and denominations are engaged in intensive conversation about policies and practices with respect to membership, leadership, and marriage of LGBTQI+ members and attendees. In some denominations, the decisions about policy have led to denominational splits in some, to the threat of denominational splits, and in others to the disfellowshipping of some congregations from the denominational organization in which they are members. For example, the decision of the United Methodist Church conference in the Spring of 2019 to retain the “traditionalist approach” is the focus of district and congregational discussions with respect to next steps. This is particularly true of those churches who identify as reconciling congregations with full inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons. In some Baptist congregations, discussions and decisions have led to denominational groups expelling churches from affiliation with their state conventions and other churches voluntarily withdrawing from affiliation. It may be that the potential for expulsion impacts a congregation’s decision about having a discernment process or not. A number of authors have addressed the discernment process from the perspective of individuals, congregations, and denominations. This literature review provides a representative sample of that work.

1.3. Impact on Congregations and Congregants

Yip and Page (2014) addressed societal impact by LGBTQI+ persons entering congregations openly and contributing to structures including those congregations and denominations. Notably, the authors addressed the mutual and reciprocal influence of what the author calls “religious spaces” which are in many cases constructed by the presence of LGBTQI+ persons as they are in or returning to religious contexts. There is evidence that the impact on congregations and on persons includes loss and grief and disruption in fellowship irrespective of the actual decision to become inclusive or remain traditionalist (Sanders 2013). Sanders edited a compendium of narratives and resources by congregations for others to use. This work, revised in 2013, collects discussions of scripture, theological positions, and congregational processes about inclusive decisions regarding LGBTQI+ persons in Christian congregations. Individual narratives of gay Christians complement family stories of coming out and finding space. Fifteen narratives of congregation processes and decisions are enhanced by sermons, meditations, and reflections on science and psychology to articulate complex thinking about a complicated topic.

Many congregations include members who are struggling with the juxtaposition of their faith and church policies about their sexual orientation or gender identity. This often includes families who experience the same struggles over an LGBTQI+ family member. One quarter of the people who identify as LGBT who were raised in religious families leave their religious tradition due to negative teachings or treatment (Hartke 2018). Ministers and congregants may disagree about interpretation of scripture and about the position of the church in response to LGBTQI+ visitors and members including about same-sex marriage. For example, this question of same-sex marriage includes the role of the pastor and whether the pastor will choose or be allowed by the congregation’s policies to conduct same-sex marriages or use the church facilities for those ceremonies. These decisions are often quite different depending on the denominational affiliation of the congregation.

While these issues mirror the larger culture and society, the pain of broken relationships and missed ministry opportunities in congregations is of concern for persons of faith. The implications of disaffiliation with denominational entities has financial and legal implications for churches in existence for many years, sometimes centuries. With so much at stake, the authors are interested in the practices in which congregations are engaging in for these discussions and decisions as well as discovering what methods or models may preserve relationships in the body of Christ and contribute to ongoing congregational life.

This ethnographic case study engaged the phenomenon in one congregation with a goal to understand the issues, the processes, the decision points, and the impact of decisions on leadership, membership, and worship. The case study is specific to one Christian faith tradition congregation. Ethnography is a research approach in the tradition of observation in natural settings. The focus in ethnography is to provide description rather than explanation and discover the information naturally from within the stories of the group studied (Rubin and Babbie 2014). It is important to the process to describe without overgeneralizing and to use comparative data sources including observation, stories, and reports. The authors identify this as a case study having taken Yin’s approach of planning, designing, preparing, collecting data, analyzing, and disseminating (2018). The benefit of this case study includes the discussion of methods that preserve relationships in difficult discussions and a pathway to minimize disruption and maximize relationships in ministry and mission. Lessons learned provide church leadership and members with tools and resources to address and minimize losses and maximize positive outcomes.

1.4. Current State of the Literature

There is little written about the processes of Christian denomination church conversations about divisive or difficult topics, including questions of inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in congregations. Sanders (2013) provided one resource including narratives from congregations in three Baptist denominations. In a focus on one congregation, Collins (2018) shared the story of one Baptist church’s

process resulting in a decision to be welcoming but not affirming. In Collins' description of that congregational process and outcome, the author presents a definition of welcoming without affirming. This position identifies welcoming as receiving LGBTQI+ persons as members of the congregation with an expectation of celibacy and a limitation from leadership and from same-sex marriage. Collins' book includes samples of other perspectives while declaring a traditionalist position of loving acceptance of same sex attraction within celibacy. The author presents this position as transformative for the LGBTQI+ congregant and for the congregation.

Lee (2012, 2018) communicates a different point of view in the testimonial book, *Torn*. Lee, a lifelong conservative Baptist Christian who is also in a gay marriage has found a different path and still respectfully engages Collins and others who disagree with him. The autobiographic account of the journey to living as an openly gay Christian was followed by the work on methods for loving conversations between people of good faith who disagree about other theological issues.

There are increasing numbers of writers addressing their own experiences. Hunter (2010) identifies the range of responses of religious clients of social workers who are dealing with gay identity ranging from no conflict with their religious beliefs to distress and even leaving their churches. While this continuum is also evident in Robertson's (2017) book of narratives from LGBTQI+ Christians, the authors of their stories often discuss the journey from hiding and self-rejection to personal and cohort revival including reconnection to faith communities. That finding is consistent as well with Chu's (2013) journey across America, interviewing LGBTQI+ persons in several congregations and denominations and finding an eventual move to re-inclusion.

The literature includes views, beliefs, experiences of leadership in Christian churches around scripture and inclusion of people who identify as LGBTQI+. This literature review includes research articles and conceptual work pertaining to differing moral stances in Christian denominations and congregations, the experiences of LGBTQI+ persons and their families within Christianity, and mental health and LGBTQI+ Christians.

1.5. Diverse Moral Stances among Christian Denominations

There are a number of writers who examine the state of the church in the United States with respect to LGBTQI+ inclusion (Chu 2013; Gaede 1998; Gushee 2017; Kaltenbach 2015; Kirkpatrick 2008; Lee 2012; Vines 2014; Wilson 2014). Chu explored the diversity within Christian response to "homosexuality," across multiple denominations and 17 churches in the United States. In this investigative analysis, the author conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with people identifying as LGBTQI+ as well as straight attendees, leadership, and laypeople to form a clearer idea of different congregations' and communities' views on homosexuality. While the author found some differences in belief and action, most evangelical churches visited in the study rejected both homosexuality as being sin and LGBTQI+ persons as unwelcome. At times, the churches extended the anti-gay advocacy well beyond the boundaries of the church. Some churches engaged in support for conversion therapy, i.e., attempts to change sexual orientation and identity (Chu 2013; Lee 2012; Vines 2014).

Multiple denominations have been and are engaged in deliberation about LGBTQI+ membership, leadership, and church sacraments including marriage and children's dedication or baptism (Collins 2018; Heuser 2012; Levy 2014; Sanders 2013; Wilson 2014). Different denominations use different terminology like inclusion in the More Light Movement in the Presbyterian denomination, the term reconciling in the United Methodist Church, and the terms open, welcoming, and affirming in the Baptist tradition. Those terms are not universally understood. For example, Collins (2018) defines welcoming differently than affirming, i.e., welcoming LGBTQI+ persons while holding a traditional view of homosexuality as sin and viewing marriage as limited to one man and one woman. Further, denominational positions do not necessarily determine congregational positions leading in some cases to disaffiliation. The theological and process differences are similar for denominations and their congregations with a distinction of who has the power to make the decisions. The same issues of

scripture, theological positions, and experiential testimonies persist across groups. The Methodist church provides one denominational example. [McConkey \(2018\)](#) recounted the history of the Methodist denomination with respect to LGBTQI+ inclusion, setting the stage for the 2019 United Methodist Church's (UMC) Annual Conference and decision which left affiliated congregations examining their place in the denomination. McConkey chronicles the crisis over LGBTQI+ membership, leadership and same-sex marriage in the United Methodist Church (UMC). The controversy has been salient for years, with different positions and practices in the denominational districts. McConkey provides an overview of three plans offered including a continuum from a more traditionalist approach to a reconciling/inclusive approach. McConkey articulates the expectation that the denomination will find a middle ground that allows congregations to determine their own path. The author provides a theological discussion of scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Since McConkey's book was published, the UMC met and voted for the traditionalist perspective. Districts and conferences are now exploring their options as congregations explore whether the division and differences are along geographic district lines or along congregational lines. It is not atypical for denominations and congregations to determine positions and resultant affiliations. In every case, these works begin to address the question of processes; there is much work still to be done to identify best practices and processes for congregations and denominations.

1.6. Models

There are few resources for civil conversations specifically about LGBTQI+ inclusion in churches, leading sometimes to disagreement and division ([Bloomquist and Duty 1999](#)). [Eckstrom \(2015\)](#) identified the loss of denominational affiliation as a possible outcome. [McCollum \(2006\)](#) described a dialogue model in *Congregations Magazine* suggesting that dialogue that cultivates understanding without eliminating conflict is possible. That is particularly important as many authors describe one of the impacts of discussion and decision around LGBTQI+ inclusion is the exodus of significant numbers of members who disagree with the decision of the majority ([Collins 2018](#); [Kirkpatrick 2008](#); [McConkey 2018](#); [Sanders 2013](#)). [Lee \(2018\)](#) provided a structured dialogue approach designed to facilitate these conversations.

This article highlights potential consequences to individual churches from denominational affiliations. The conversation and decision over inclusive and affirming practices can lead to negative denominational and financial outcomes. There is no discussion of the possible positive impacts for congregations or for LGBTQI+ individuals in the congregation. There are churches which agree to disagree or have a "don't ask, don't tell" approach ([Chu 2013](#)). Other denominations, like the Episcopal Church, continue to have congregational differences while experiencing denominational change including the ordination of a lesbian bishop.

1.7. LGBTQI+ Experiences within Christianity

The [McQueeney \(2009\)](#) ethnographic case study included 200 h of participant-observation and 25 in-depth interviews in two lesbian and gay affirming congregations, a small (60 membership) primarily African American congregation and a midsize (550 membership) primarily White congregation. The methodology included participant observation in worship services, Bible studies, holy unions, social events, and regional conferences; detailed field notes; reflection notes; document analysis of newsletters, local newspaper articles, list-serve messages, and publications disseminated by the churches and their denominations; and interview transcripts

[McQueeney \(2009\)](#) found that lesbian, gay, and straight but affirming church members use minimizing, normalizing, and moralizing to accommodate "heteronormative conceptions" of Christians. [Murr's \(2013\)](#) case study explored the experiences of LGBTQI+ people who identify as Christian and identified themes among women with significant spiritual experiences within and outside of organized faith communities. Attaining affirming or meaningful spiritual practice included both negative and positive experiences and the need to resolve conflict. Harmful experiences included family conflict,

rejection from their faith communities, shame and internalized negative messages, and self-change attempts. More positively, participants held onto their faith through meaningful spiritual experiences, celebrations and rituals, and the presence of community (Murr 2013). Kaltenbach (2015) described the importance of loving everyone, including the gay community, in the church without having to sacrifice conviction.

Subhi and Geelan (2012) explored the conflict of beliefs between Christianity and homosexuality in a qualitative study of 20 individuals identifying as both homosexual and Christian. Twenty percent reported no conflict between Christianity and homosexuality, but those same participants reported having left their faith or the church. Those still in the church reported marginalization and relationship challenges with an impact on their mental health including depression, anxiety, guilt, alienation, and suicidal ideation. Harris and Yancey (2017) explored the issue of value dissonance in social workers and mental health workers practicing in churches or in religiously affiliated agencies.

1.8. Mental Health of LGBTQI+ Christians

For the congregation in this case study, inclusion of persons with mental illness and attention to mental health have been important for years and were a part of the discernment process. While the literature on the mental health and LGBTQI+ Christians is fairly extensive, attention is paid here to a study with similar methodology and to mention of several articles that address the increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidality in LGBTQI+ Christians.

Two years prior to the writings of Barton (2010) examined the interfaces of Christian faith and doctrine, the message of the sin of homosexuality, and the associated impact on mental health. This ethnographic case study included observation of persons identifying as homosexual living with the influence of fundamentalist Christian dogma, messages, and attitudes. The 46 participants discussed their experiences of coming out, reactions of family, friends, community and members of affiliated religious groups including any affirmation and any homophobia they had experienced. The authors found that negative social attitudes about homosexuality led to destructive consequences including the fear of going to hell, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness. Cole and Harris (2017) found similarly that Christians who identified as LGBTQI+ persons reported seeking counseling and mental health services for the same reasons reported by heterosexual persons: anxiety, depression, and life adjustment rather than for counseling to change orientation or identity. While the literature suggests that LGBTQI+ persons experience higher rates of suicidality, there seems to be a connection to heterosexism in Christianity and the experience of marginalization and rejection from one's family and from one's family of faith (Cole and Harris 2017; Harris and Yancey 2017; Morrow and Tyson 2006).

1.9. Summary

This study provides a case example supporting patterns that emerge in the literature of the experiences of LGBTQI+ people and Christian denominations. These include the struggle over questions of morality and questions of acceptance. Many churches struggle with accepting LGBTQI+ people while LGBTQI+ people struggle with the experience of exclusion. Pain and division are experienced on both sides of the issue. Many churches experience a split and/or, at a minimum, loss of membership, while the LGBTQI+ community is often marginalized by decisions and the hurt is broadly felt.

The case studies identified in the literature focus mainly on the outcomes of the experiences of churches and individuals. The gap in research lies in the paucity of data around the actual procedures and processes that lead to these outcomes. The authors hope that this case study of the process and procedures as well as impact and outcomes of one church may lead to better understanding for churches and their members identifying as Christian LGBTQI+ people.

2. Results

This case study was designed to explore the day to day discernment processes and decision outcomes of a church that now has a statement of affirmation and full inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons. A social work intern was embedded in the congregation for her field work internship for an academic year. Further, the congregation was one of 20 in which a minimum of five ministers, leaders, or congregants were interviewed by researchers. Data from the case study and from the interviews were included in the findings with an emphasis on the researcher's 10 months within the congregation.

2.1. The Decision

After much discussion, deliberation, review, and inquiry in the church, the Diversity Task Force wrote a diversity statement, the deacons and committee members reviewed it and the church voted by secret ballot at a scheduled meeting. All members present were eligible to vote; secret ballots were counted; and the diversity statement for the church to be openly welcoming and affirming of all people was passed in December 2014.

Positive and negative impacts of the decision included some loss and some gain of membership and loss of denominational affiliation, i.e., being disfellowshipped by the denominational body. Positive responses by congregational members to the decision to be welcoming and affirming included "We were ecstatic . . . we were so glad we didn't have to talk about this again like it's done; thank goodness it's done." Others were displeased and left the church. In subsequent months, new members joined the church in response to the decision. While church leaders wondered how the budget would be impacted, the budget remains strong and was not noticeably impacted. In addition to the loss of affiliation with the denominational organization, recently, the church decided to withhold funding to the administrative mission of a denominational body in response to their stance against hiring people from the LGBTQI+ community in leadership. The church hopes the denomination will reconsider this position. The church finds this to be a position of integrity for their members who have been employed by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ([Camp 2018](#)).

2.2. Findings

Congregational records, sermon texts, congregant letters to the pastor, minutes of meetings, the policy/diversity statement, participant-observation field notes, and interviews were analyzed using NVivo and multiple researcher reading and conversations regarding both the process and the outcomes/impact of the process and decision(s). The research team compared findings to determine consistencies and used member checking when there were questions. Several themes emerged that were consistent across the records at the time of the congregation's decision and in the field notes and observations by the student intern/ethnographer. These identified themes which addressed the research questions included integrity; belonging of everyone, articulated in subthemes of inclusion, relationship, and community; and personality of the church including its response to being disfellowshipped. The themes are expressed in documents and experiences, are consistent with responses in the five congregant/leadership interviews, and are aligned with research questions.

2.3. Integrity

Sermons, meeting minutes, pastoral and leadership letters, interviews and field notes are consistent in identifying the intent of the church leadership and members to live in the authenticity of their faith. This experience of authenticity seemed best summed up with the word integrity, which is defined as firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic; an unimpaired condition-soundness; and the quality or state of being complete or undivided completeness ([Merriam-Webster dictionary 2019](#)) and wholeness and unity ([Cambridge.org 2019](#)). The history of the church in this case study is one of justice and reconciliation and includes consistency in seeking the wholeness of persons and communities. Pastoral sermons from 2005 through 2014 include discussion of the mission of the

church and experiences of the minister and leadership that began to change their understanding of marginalized persons including LGBTQI+ persons. In 2005, a midweek sermon included the pastor's care for a parishioner who was described as hiding his sexuality until he was dying with AIDS. The negative impact of stigma and shame led to the pastor's new understanding of the importance of unconditional love in the church. A pastor in 2014 preached a series of sermons on his understanding of scripture speaking to attitudes of inclusion: "No longer did I question can a homosexual person be a Christian and no longer did I think as I often had, why would someone choose to be a homosexual? These questions no longer made sense to me. Sexual orientation no longer seemed more of a choice than blue eyes, skin color, or racial identity. It just is." Another sermon focused on responsibility of the church not to follow the Mt. Everest rule, i.e., not to take care of oneself first and noted that more than 2000 biblical passages admonish focus on money goals while only 500 scriptures deal with prayer. One interviewee said: "This is a church where she can bring her whole self to and where we can have difficult conversations. It's real, and we can come here and we don't have to hide anything" (G1A1 para 27).

A number of quotations from the interviews confirm this theme of consistency in position for completeness. A congregant, G1C1, made several telling statements: "But I think we had always been living it out. We'd always had gay members. We've always known they were gay. We've had gay deacons. So, I don't think by the time we boiled it down, we were in a pretty healthy spot as far as this was concerned." "I think it was more of just all of us evolving kind of slowly together and this was just one more step . . . it was just one more step in allowing other people to know who we were and who we'd always been."

A church leader articulated it this way: "Because the whole point to me of the diversity statement and what it was saying about discrimination is that there are no levels to church membership." Another leader stated: "I do think it helped the church open her eyes and say, 'This is who we are and we are proud of it.'"

The field notes of the student intern researcher reported these same approaches. "This church continues to fight the good fight of love for the most vulnerable and marginalized" (Fall, 2018). One note in response to a church meeting about ministry to the homeless population reflected: "I am soaked in the shame of my upbringing; it takes time to build trust in oneself and others." These consistent messages of completeness, unity, and justice define the term integrity in the church.

This theme is very consistent with the narratives of church decisions in Sanders' (2013) work on congregational processes and decisions. Further, it is the central theme of Lee's (2012, 2018) recommendation that persons and congregations find the paths that are true to who they are.

2.4. *Belonging and Inclusion*

The theme of belonging has several articulations in the data. The first is that of inclusion; the second is about relationship and community. These manifestations of belonging are pervasive in both the process documentation and the interviews.

The process of discernment began with one pastor and continued with an interim pastor and task force during a time of transition. "Anyone who wanted to be on the committee could volunteer" (G1A1) is an example of belonging. While several congregants described not feeling heard in the process, the church only lost two couples as a result of the vote and decision which is experienced as another demonstration of belonging.

The sermons included in the process for church discernment focused on the importance of inclusion of all persons in all aspects of the life of the church including women, LGBTQI+ persons, persons of color and other diversity, persons who are homeless, persons with mental illness and/or substance use. Several documents including the final statement voted on in the process, the church website, and interview transcripts use the words "welcome and wanted" (G1A1 para 12). Field notes mention meetings and meals with church staff, members (including homeless persons), and the ethnographer sitting together sharing repast and church tasks. Participation in ministry to others was one way that

homeless church members demonstrated their experience of belonging. Several homeless women were part of providing supplies and blankets for homeless persons during bad weather and others delivered meals to homeless persons. Notably, interviewees commented on inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons as members, as leaders, and as staff of the church. This was another example of being welcomed and wanted. Lee's (2012), Chu's (2013), and Robertson's (2017) narratives all confirm the importance to LGBTQI+ persons of being included and in fact, describe the journeys of LGBTQI+ persons through conversion and reparative therapy to find a way to belong. Collins (2018) describes a congregation's decision to welcome LGBTQI+ persons with the provision of celibacy. They may report over time their experience with LGBTQI+ persons' continuation in the congregation.

2.5. Relationship and Community

One of the ways belonging was demonstrated was through the development of relationships on a micro level and the development of community on a macro level. The original process for discernment was documented in letters to congregants and through sermon delivery and church community meetings to the congregation. One pastoral letter to congregants discussed the appointment of a Diversity Action Team specifically to discuss how to broaden and deepen their welcome to all people (Letter October 2014). In a letter sent several months later, the pastor articulated the steps of the discernment process with intent to learn how to better manifest God's love to all people. A drafted inclusion statement included that language as well. The following is that statement.

We wish to convey to all people that the name redacted Church of location redacted:

welcomes and wants people of every race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, physical and mental ability, nationality, and economic station to thrive in the full life of our community; affirms and celebrates all people as created in God's very image and likeness; strives to walk with Jesus by treating people authentically, recognizing that we are common in our diversity ... (Church 2018, Anonymous Inclusion Statement)

Records of church meetings during a time of transition included a message that the church leadership was interested in a discernment decision of inclusion prior to the search for the new pastor.

The concept of community was emphasized in several ways. Meetings were scheduled during the discernment process to provide opportunity to hear from everyone in the church. The inclusion statement was provided to the entire congregation prior to the vote and the vote was held in a congregation wide meeting, by secret ballot. The vote for inclusion was 232 for and 47 against. In response to discussion about the inevitable outcome of being disfellowshipped by the state denominational group, the decision was made to "not act out of fear" and to act in commitment to communicate to everyone, including those not in favor of the inclusive statement, that all are welcome and wanted.

The participant-observer (the social work intern) recorded observations at church meetings that document LGBTQI+ inclusion in all church processes as well as inclusion of homeless persons and of mentally ill persons through the development of an accompaniment program. The church has since hired the student social work intern as a staff member to implement the program of accompanying those with persistent mental illness and those with chronic homelessness by providing case management and counseling, but more remarkably, by providing a safe space and the reality of belonging. This strengths perspective and inclusion model exemplifies the "welcome and wanted" position of the church. That is a significant expression of the personality of the church.

This theme, in some ways builds on the themes of integrity and belonging. McConkey's description of the three paths of the UMC suggest different levels of community available to LGBTQI+ persons with the traditionalist view not inviting leadership or full participation in the church sacrament of marriage. That is consistent with Collins' perspectives and we may discover over time the implications for community and relationship.

2.6. Personality of the Church

There is a distinction between what a congregation does and who they are. The consistency from sermons to meetings to correspondence to field notes to interviews suggests that the personality or character of the church is one of inclusion. The findings are consistent across time from as early as 2005 to current year interviews, a time span of almost 15 years. Several years ago, the deacon body responded to the Supreme Court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage (Supreme Court 2015). The deacon writing the letter commends the church for taking on the spiritual work of discernment to become welcoming and affirming and implores them not to change stating:

Even though ministers have previously officiated at same sex unions, commitment ceremonies and even legal marriages in other states, they now have the legal authority to perform weddings here in our state and because of our Diversity Statement, they have been given our church's blessing to perform these weddings (Church 2016, Anonymous Deacon Letter.).

The personality of the church is one of valuing each person's story which makes room for difference. One church member shared the story of her father's alcoholism and what it felt like to live with that stigma and shame. She voted no to the diversity statement but:

"I wanna have this conversation. Totally anti our church ever being welcoming and affirming, but what I've realized is I might not agree with that person, but I don't ever want somebody to have to hide something like I did growing up." And her statement broke the room open. And it was so beautiful because it wasn't about sex, but it was about so much that is a part of this, not holding anything in (G1A1 para 29).

The church's positions are consistent across changes in leadership and in the significant changes in the congregation as membership now includes LGBTQI+ persons, homeless persons, persons with persistent mental illness, and persons from a diversity of backgrounds. The approach of community through shared meals and through intentional accompaniment of persons through life challenges all reflect the nature and personality, perhaps the spiritual DNA, of the congregation. This personality is reflected in the Diversity Statement approved by the church.

We are a Baptist community of faith searching to find various ways to ensure that we are a welcoming congregation of all people, including those who have been wounded and outcast. Therefore, we wish to convey to all people that the Church welcomes and wants people of every race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, physical and mental ability, nationality, and economic station to thrive in the full life of our community; affirms and celebrates all people as created in God's very image and likeness; strives to walk with Jesus by treating people authentically, recognizing that we are common in our diversity; and challenges and inspires all people to live according to their Sacred identity in Christ. According to Genesis 1:27; Psalm 8:3-5; Luke 4:18-19; I Corinthians 12:3-7.

3. Discussion

From this case study, one could conclude that doing the hard work of discernment, though painful (Chu 2013), has positive results that are worth the process. This congregation took time and incorporated processes for meaningful and informed discussions including straight and LGBTQI+ brothers and sisters of Christ.

The case study suggests that it is possible for a church to experience a process available to be replicated by other congregations who are interested in this social justice issue. Further, the study suggests that it is possible for congregations to engage in a process around controversial issues that result in a congregationally informed decision. This is consistent with Lee's (2018) recommendations about difficult conversations. As congregations include members with differing understandings of scripture and differing beliefs about membership and leadership, an intentional process of study and

discernment leading to a congregational membership vote is a legitimate method for decision making (Sanders 2013).

The participant-observer was a social work intern. There are implications for social workers as well, both as congregants and as employees on the ministerial staff of a congregation. As practitioners in the field of social work who are committed to practice cultural competency, social workers will engage members of the LGBTQI+ population and advocate for just treatment. Understanding the balance of religious freedom and cultural competence can create value dissonance. A social worker's position in helping a church with a discernment process is consistent with ethical practice and for a social worker who identifies as Christian, with living into the integrity of Jesus' message and life illustration seen in Romans 1:7, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." For social workers, this can be experienced as upholding the value of social justice as outlined in the Code of Ethics and an opportunity to exercise the ethical integration of faith and practice for practitioners.

Congregations may choose to use this church's process as a model or to adapt this model to use for their own discussion and decision process. The process was inclusive and occurred over time and resulted in little loss of membership or income and apparent additions of membership over time. With adaptations and intentional planning based on this model, other congregations could prepare for a decision by the congregation and adaptations to any loss and changes in membership and denominational affiliations. This is also a space that social workers could potentially step into to help congregations navigate the grief and loss that can result from this process.

The current model includes a congregational social worker providing an example of the role of social workers in churches including the ethical integration of faith and practice and competent standards of care. Social workers bring value to the importance of human relationships and communication and deliberation skills and leadership. Consequently, having a social worker present for these processes could not only be practical but also they could prove to be of significant worth to the outcomes for the dignity and worth of individuals in congregations, particularly persons who may be formally marginalized.

The qualitative nature of this study allows for unique themes and meanings to emerge that can lead to new studies and/or theories. Another strength of this study is the capturing of individual and group stories with the capacity to influence policy and programming. This research brings deeper understanding and meaning to the lived experiences of a congregation considering LGBTQI+ inclusion and resulting outreach to other marginalized populations. This gives voice to marginalized persons and challenges the status quo while acknowledging religious freedom for the right of the congregation to make policy decisions.

The sample size of this study is respectable for its design and is representative of the defined population in the proposal, and the criteria for the sample is clearly identified. However, results of this study are not generalizable to any other population or group. It is subject to sampling bias by possibly favoring inclusion of those in the LGBTQI+ population which is not distinctly acknowledged in the proposal. None of the members who left in the wake of the decision were approached for interviews. Capturing those perspectives would have strengthened the study.

The collection methods for this study were appropriate and have strong merit because of the varied approach to collecting the data. A strength and limitation of this study was the student social work intern researcher in the participant-observer role. The viewpoints of the researcher were subjective and prone to bias, making it difficult to establish reliability and validity. Each lived observation, interview, or reading of historical documents from when this decision was being discussed was experienced as a profound spiritual and emotional experience impacting the social work intern's reconnection to the Christian faith. The process and decision of the congregation to ensure all are wanted, affirmed, and loved was experienced by the social work intern as the lived gospel of Jesus.

4. Materials and Methods

This research was part of a broader qualitative, phenomenological study with key interviews in selected congregations from three different denominations. In this ethnographic case study, a masters social work intern was embedded in the congregation to observe, talk with members, and to examine church documents related to the discernment process, all while attending worship services, leadership meetings, and church events. The single subject case study used two data gathering methods with an ethnographic approach to understanding the congregation's lived experience of decision making and inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons' membership, leadership, and participation in the congregation. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researchers' university reviewed and approved the project. The case study method "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin 2014, p. 15). Yin found that a case study is an appropriate research method when there are potentially more variables than data points with multiple sources of information in response to theoretical perspectives that inform the research process. In this study, the case study takes an ethnographic approach with a social work intern embedded in the congregational staff over a period of ten months. As an intern there was no conflict of interest. The intern was not hired as part of the staff until well after the completion of the study.

4.1. Research Questions

This study was nested in a larger mixed methods study of 20 congregations across three denominations. The research questions in that study included:

R1: What were the processes/leadership/membership involvement, what decisions were made, and what were the impacts of those decisions?

R2: What are the questions the denomination/congregation identified and how are/were those questions addressed?

R3: What were the lessons learned from this experience and what recommendations/resources might benefit other congregations starting down this path?

These key research questions were modified for the case study to address congregational and denominational processes for discernment, the motivations and experiences of church leadership, and the decisions and their impact, including lessons learned. These questions were addressed through documentation of church processes and relationships.

4.2. Definition of Key Terms

Terms used in this study are defined here. Welcoming and affirming is full acceptance of persons regardless of race, gender, culture, sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQI+ is an acronym to describe persons whose sexual orientation or identity is either lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, questioning, including others along the spectrum. Bi-sexual refers to sexual attraction to both men and women without preference. Transgender refers to people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (LGBTQ+ Definitions 2018).

4.3. Sample

The congregation was selected by convenience sample as the student researcher was placed there as an intern through the student field placement process. There were two sampling frames for this study: participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. The inclusion criteria for the participant-observation included the observations and experiences of the student through worship services, meetings related to the congregation, small group meetings, Bible studies, community meals, and social services and conversations the researcher engaged in as a part of the internship in

congregational life during Fall 2018 and Spring 2019. Included also were church records including minutes and historical records and archives related to LGBTQI+ policy and practice.

The inclusion criteria for the interviewees was church membership of ministers, leaders, and congregants. The selection process began with the senior pastor and continued through snowball sampling based on the senior pastor's recommendations. Discussion with the pastor included a description of the study and the case study option. Following discussion with church leadership, the pastor agreed for that congregational site to be used as a case study for the larger study. The student intern was embedded in the congregation. One of the principal investigators conducted five interviews including the pastor, three church lay leaders and one congregant.

4.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The method in this case study was participant-observation, based on the student researcher's observed thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions which were recorded in a field journal of field notes. The researcher attended activities as described and collected written media materials such as bulletins, meeting minutes, and work email messages provided by the pastor's assistant. Data was analyzed using NVivo software for themes pertaining to congregational and denominational processes, conversations, motivation and experiences of church leadership and members, decisions and impact of decisions on the congregation as they pertain to LGTBQI+ issues.

Qualitative interviews included a set of semi-structured questions addressing processes, descriptions, perceptions, decisions, and challenges around the church decision. The researcher identified themes in five transcribed interviews.

4.5. Procedures

The student researcher was in the role of participant-observer for the day to day "living out" of the practices of the church and members documented in field notes of observations from and printed or electronic materials. Participants were de-identified and given an ID number. Field notes were recorded after staff meetings, worship services, small groups/Sunday school, mid-week services, special events, and or after the working day.

Interviewees included the pastor, three church leaders and one congregant; all interviewees were adults, excluding children who were 18 years of age and younger and non-members. Informed consent for interviews was provided by each interviewee; the pastor provided informed consent for the case study with the church. Data collection took place from August 2018 through April 2019. Data collected included the demographics of participants and the demographics of the church which were gathered in person and by website, other printed materials which were both current and historical, and interview transcripts.

4.6. Process and Motivation

The interviewees provided retrospective perspectives to the historic process of the congregation. In 2014, the pastor of the church preached several teaching sermons on the topics of homosexuality, inclusion, and related subjects. Sermons were based on scriptures in the Christian bible. The church task force examined how to respond to the changing world around them and the growing concern for a dropping attendance. The church's leaders brought in a consultant for advice to respond to these changes.

In the church, a task force of 15 members conducted appreciative inquiry around implications of becoming welcoming and affirming of all people. The task force met for over a year in which they discussed the open inclusion of LGBTQI+ people including creating a marriage policy. They explored what other churches were doing and several task force members attended an ecumenical workshop for a 15-step process for helping churches in similar processes.

To promote membership participation, the pastor held after-church town hall meetings with panel discussions and a series of goals for the church to discern inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community and

others historically excluded. The panels consisted of approximately six people from both inside and outside the church to capture a broad perspective of the subjects discussed.

5. Conclusions

The identification of themes from both the ethnographic study and the five interviews is important for this congregation and in the larger study which examines church processes and outcomes. Naming the themes was challenging but designed to capture language that is important to the congregation and consistent with the history of the church. Checking in with the pastor was important to represent well the experience and lessons of the church. It was significant that the themes of the church were consistent. An unexpected outcome of the ethnographic study and internship was the church hiring the student intern to be part of the ongoing staff and ministry team.

The researchers recommend additional research on discernment processes and outcomes in multiple denominations and congregations and in fact, in other faith traditions and religions. An important consideration is the role of social workers in religiously affiliated agencies and congregations to include the examination of diversity, marginalization, and methods for inclusivity. Further, researchers and social workers are in a position to examine how the motivations and processes of such processes and decisions impact persons in the congregation and impact those who have been historically and currently excluded. This is important for social workers caring for individuals holistically, including with respect to their spiritual or faith beliefs. Continuing this work helps to bridge the gaps in research on this topic and provides context for congregational decisions about inclusion.

When congregations engage in processes and discussion about LGBTQI+ persons in congregations, there is validation that faith is an important factor in the wholeness and well-being of many people regardless of their sexual identity. Further research both into processes and outcomes should include the impact on LGBTQI+ mental health, suicidality, and other psychosocial problems common in marginalized groups. It is essential in this process not to marginalize any voices, including those who disagree with a congregational decision, whatever the decision is. If common ground can be found, it will be found in hearing all voices.

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