

**MAKING THE COVENANT WORK:  
A WEB-BASED RESOURCE FOR WELCOMING GAY PASTORS**

[www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com)

A Dissertation/Project

presented to

The Committee for Advanced Pastoral Studies

San Francisco Theological Seminary

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

By

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Title of Dissertation/Project:  
Making The Covenant Work: A Web-Based Resource for Welcoming Gay Pastors  
[www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com)

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This Dissertation/Project is approved by the Advanced Pastoral Studies Committee, upon recommendation by the Advisor, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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## **Abstract**

### **MAKING THE COVENANT WORK: A WEB-BASED RESOURCE FOR WELCOMING GAY PASTORS**

[www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com)

by

Kevin A. Johnson

This dissertation project is designed to create, deliver, and support the website, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com). The project's purpose is to encourage and welcome gay pastors hired by congregations that are not demographically dependent upon the LGBTQ community. The website provides more than 150 video interview clips with 12 gay pastors answering up to 20 questions, video resources from online media and denominational archives, and a "7 Monthly Meetups" plan. The meetups are designed for congregations and gay pastors to use in support of establishing and building their ministry covenant so the covenant works well and with lasting benefit. This paper is an adjunct to the website, offering research and materials to use in the early months of the mutual covenant—to enhance the relationships between gay pastors, search committees, and hiring congregations.

Chapter One, Introduction: Includes historical and personal accounts to embody the problem statement; ecclesiastical and historical-political factors to demonstrate hinderances faced by gay pastors in their careers and socio-religious catalysts that produce barriers to gay pastors.

Chapter Two, Social Analysis: Presents discussions of local church experience; homophobia and heterosexism; cross-cultural hires; racial and cultural stereotyping using

controlling images, myths, and metanarratives (e.g. mammies, sapphires, and jezebels); family systems theory; adaptive action (including anonymous bias—exemplified with the Academy Award nominated film, *A Time for Burning*; and the CDE model. Also included are discussions of psychological change theories; congregation and community conditions; and select psychological theories and practices.

Chapter Three, Theological Reflection: Includes Bible-based opposition and support; church leaders abandoning anti-gay positions; varied theologies in local church ministry; clergy theological journey; womanist theology; Brueggemann’s canary in a coal mine comparison, and this author’s perspective as a gay pastor. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the polities of the UCC, Episcopal, ELCA, PCU (USA) denominations, and a few ecumenical considerations.

Chapter Four, The Project: Describes technical and content development; presents brief biographies of the 12 interviewees; plus, recommendations and pedagogy for the “7 Monthly Meetups” plan. Lastly, feedback and evaluation observations are included.

Chapter Five, Conclusions: Provides closing observations, impact statement, and an epilogue.

Appendices: Contains scripts, forms, and the meetups plan.

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Dr. Sharon Rae Graff, Advisor

## Dedication

- To my husband since December 14, 2013, and partner since August 28, 1998, Michael Patrick Shear. This educational journey accompanied our marriage thus far.
- To Bloom in the Desert Ministries United Church of Christ and Reconciling Ministries congregation. Their moral, spiritual, and financial support was essential to this process.
- To clergy colleagues Rabbi David Lazar, the Rev. Fr. Andrew Green, the Rev. Dr. Stephen Wayles, and the Rev. Ron Lang who, along with many others, encouraged me to continue at times when I was faltering. Their boosts lifted and motivated me to go on.
- To D/P advisor the Rev. Dr. Sharon Rae Graff. And Julie (Fess) Henkalin, lay reviewer of content and grammar, who, 40 years ago, proofed (her mother Lucy Fess typed) my MDiv senior thesis. Their work kept me clear and helped me throughout.
- To the 12 gay pastors who gave me time and permission to present parts of their stories.
- To the Rev. Dr. William (Bill) Johnson, the first out gay man ordained in modern historical Christianity, who served 35 years, but was denied parish calls. As my brother by another mother, Bill was my inspiration for the idea that this resource was needed.
- To the Kenosha First United Methodist Church, which fired me in November 1981, and said, “we’re sorry,” in February 2017. The congregation’s weekend series of reconciliation events, welcoming my husband and me to the local church and surrounding communities, demonstrated that gay pastors can be both cherished and effective in leadership. Thank you for giving me the most important ecclesiastical day of my life since my 1979 United Methodist Elder’s ordination.
- To so many colleagues, friends, and family members: “Thank you for your support.”

# Contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Personal History.....	2
Problem.....	9
Ecclesiastical Factors.....	9
Historical-Political Factors.....	20
Looking Ahead.....	26
<b>2. SOCIAL ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Local Church Experience.....	30
Homophobia and Heterosexism.....	33
Cross Cultural Hires.....	42
Racial and Cultural Stereotyping: Controlling Images, Myths, and Metanarratives.....	45
Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels.....	47
Family Systems Theory.....	51
Adaptive Action.....	66
Unveiling They/Everybody.....	72
Container, Difference, Exchange (CDE) Model.....	75
Psychological Change Theories .....	81
Congregation and Community Conditions.....	84
Select Theories in Practice.....	86
<b>3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION.....</b>	<b>97</b>
Bible-based Opposition.....	98

Bible-based Support.....	99
This Gay Pastor’s Perspective.....	101
Church Leaders Evolve from Anti-Gay Positions .....	104
Varied Theologies in Local Church Ministry.....	106
Clergy Theological Journey.....	108
Womanist Theology – The Crossroads and “ <i>Regardless</i> ”.....	111
Brueggemann and the Canary in a Coal Mine.....	116
Polities.....	119
UCC – Hiring and Pastor’s Role.....	121
Episcopal Church – Hiring and Pastor’s Role.....	126
ELCA – Hiring and Pastor’s Role.....	129
PC(USA) – Hiring and Pastor’s Role.....	132
Ecumenical Considerations.....	134
<b>4. THE PROJECT.....</b>	<b>136</b>
Technology.....	137
Content.....	139
Interviewees.....	141
7 Monthly Meetups.....	149
Feedback and Evaluation.....	154
<b>5. CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>161</b>
Epilogue .....	172
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>173</b>
A. YouTube Site Introduction Video Script.....	173

B. D/P Video Interview Disclosure and Informed Consent Form .....	176
C. D/P Video Release Form.....	177
D. Video Interview 20 Questions.....	178
E. 7 Monthly Meetups Plan.....	179
i. Preparation.....	179
ii. 7 Monthly Meetups Plans and Discussion Topics.....	180
iii. Supporting Resources.....	182
F. Feedback Form.....	184
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>186</b>

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation project (D/P) intends to help churches welcome gay pastors into local ministry and gay pastors to feel more confident in doing so. Its purpose is to help make the covenant between a congregation and their newly hired pastor get off to a healthy and productive start, then continue well as they work their mission together. Throughout this D/P, the use of “gay” refers to out-of-the-closet gay men, who are fully functioning as adult church professionals, with clergy credentials in good standing.

Historical narrative, personal experiences, social and theological analysis delve into the subject in the dissertation. The project portion consists of more than 150 original video interview clips and transcripts from 12 gay pastors posted on the newly created “Gay Pastor Welcome” YouTube channel, plus a website: [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com). These documentary-style video resources offer the benefit of real-life experience and advice. The website also provides an outline for persons to use as a brief pedagogical resource—a simple plan for monthly meetings, beginning one month before the gay pastor’s arrival and continuing six months into his first year. Included in the D/P’s package is a DVD-R with the digital video files and Adobe Acrobat .pdf transcript files of the twelve video interviews. The purpose of the interviews and the pedagogy is to facilitate a socially unhindered arrival and to demystify some intrinsic cultural assumptions pertaining to homosexuals early in the first year of a gay pastor’s tenure.

This first chapter presents personal history and relationships that were the catalyst for the D/P. Ecclesiastical and political factors are presented to augment the personal recollections. These factors explore facets of the problem, which is the fact that gay

pastors have a difficult time getting hired, though they may be ordained, authorized, and in good standing to serve local churches.

### **Personal History**

I bring roughly 40 years of experience as a gay pastor—both serving and exiled—to this work. As an uncloseted gay man since the age of 27 (1980), I embody the experience of negative attitudes and ecclesiastical rules purposely designed to exclude homosexuals from the clergy. My personal story and qualifications provide context for the need and purpose of this D/P.

In December 1975, ten days after graduating magna cum laude from college with a high school speech teaching degree, I entered a United Methodist seminary in Dayton, Ohio. While completing Master of Divinity courses, I helped form a prayer group that doubled as an evangelical caucus and was elected student body president my senior year. Additionally, I did work-study for two years as the student associate pastor of a mid-size United Methodist Church (UMC), which had evangelical leadership, in a town of 22,000 people 20 miles north of Dayton. During this time, I participated in a light dose of charismatic spirituality, with speaking in tongues being the defining manifestation. Looking back, throughout adolescence I sensed my very repressed homosexual orientation. But knowing church, family, and societal prohibitions, I accessed spiritual resources of the time, resisted the thoughts, and prayed them aside while occasionally pursuing hetero dating.

In June 1978, I graduated from seminary and received my bishop's appointment to a 1200-member United Methodist Church (UMC) in Kenosha, Wisconsin, as an

associate pastor. I was ordained an Elder in the UMC in June 1979. Two years later, while coming to terms with understanding myself as a gay man—I call it making friends with myself—I was damaged personally and professionally by church actions.

Written every four years by the meeting of elected representatives acting as the general conference, the UMC’s denominational *The Book of Discipline* persists in the notion that living an authentic and healthy life as an uncloseted, open and out homosexual is “...incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>1</sup> The teaching reference has never been officially defined. Rather, the assumption is that there is general agreement on what the Christian church teaches about human sexuality. In a text used by the Southern California Nevada Conference of the UCC for clergy boundary training and certification, written primarily by UMC-associated academics, pastors, and executives, Professor Rosemary Radford Reuther (a Roman Catholic) posits: “Western Christianity is in a state of conflict over its teaching on sexuality. The framework of Augustine’s theological worldview still deeply shapes Protestant as well as Roman Catholic thought.”<sup>2</sup> Due to this ongoing ode to Augustine and others, since 1972 the UMC has been embroiled in conflict and controversy over gay and lesbian clergy, and bishops have made concerted efforts to

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<sup>1</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016),

<https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/DynamicContent.aspx?id=87&pageid=920#9568.Paragraph 303:4>

<sup>2</sup> Darryl W. Stephens, ed., *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 65.

“screen out homosexual persons from becoming ordained ministers.”<sup>3</sup> In my case, I was summarily fired from my church position as a young minister in 1981, when word spread via rumor that I was a “practicing”<sup>4</sup> gay, which I confirmed in private meetings with lay and clergy colleagues.

My history is not unique compared to many other clergy, though details differ. As a pastor now living and serving a church in Palm Springs, California, which is known as a gay-friendly desert resort and retirement destination, I meet gay retired former clergy regularly. Many lost their church jobs when they came out or were outed. I also meet gay and straight lay people, hurt deeply by religious leaders who learned of their homosexual orientation and/or insulted gay family members with Bible-based taunts and social rejection. In the early decades of the 2000s, despite recent gains in civil rights for homosexuals in the United States and many other countries, most notably wider equal access to marriage and its civil benefits, it is essential to recognize the pain religious officials continue to cause the global LGBTQ community.

On my journey after church rejection, I moved to Chicago and secured executive jobs in business for the next 20 years. For the first 10 years, I had very little to do with church beyond annual, officially required registrations. Yet, this did not reflect personal

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Tuell, “Bishop Tuell: How I Changed My Mind (2003),” Advocacy Organization, *Reconciling Ministries Network*, January 11, 2014, accessed June 26, 2018, <https://rmnetwork.org/bishop-tuell-how-i-changed-my-mind/>.

<sup>4</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016*. Paragraph 303:4

loss of faith. In my spiritual self, despite losing confidence in the integrity of Christian church leaders, I trusted the continued love of God. I maintained good standing in official church relationships. As I gained good relationships with welcoming Chicago clergy and church members, I haltingly returned to somewhat regular Sunday worship attendance and occasional congregational participation.

Business remained my ersatz career from 1982 to 2002. The first seven years as an executive recruiter working with top-tier banking, accounting, and consulting corporations gave me first-hand experience in work-life demands and routines that many pastors never have. More than a decade in documentary and corporate communications production followed. That experience helped me learn how to tell a story intended to make a difference. Every job involved sales and marketing. Some jobs involved managing a sales force. This was rewarding work, though I never got rich. Instead, I gained valuable experience in global commerce and worldly arts that many pastors may lack.

However, the influence of church on my professional standing was never absent; though a career in business was never my personal calling. Being a pastor was. In my life journey, the loss of 20 years from the career of my calling remains a sadness.

For 37 years as an ordained UMC member—from 1976 until I changed my ministerial standing to the United Church of Christ (UCC) in 2013—I lived under the threat of ecclesiastical charges and being defrocked. Even though I could not get a job in the church system, colleagues on the Wisconsin Conference UMC Board of Ordained Ministry and the Executive Session (clergy) of the conference voted every year to keep my ordination credentials in good standing. That status eventually enabled me to cofound

Bloom in the Desert Ministries (Bloom) with my partner-now-husband in Palm Springs in 2002.

The sense of authority to begin the new-church venture came from relationships gained through the Reconciling Ministries Network in the UMC, the Church Within A Church Movement, whose slogan inspired and challenged us to “BE fully inclusive church,” and the Broadway UMC congregation in Chicago, Illinois, which held our memberships. On June 16, 2002, Michael Shear and I were commissioned to “go west and do ministry” by the Broadway Sunday Morning congregation with prayers and laying on of hands. Broadway UMC also functioned as Bloom’s fiscal agent for financial donations and the official UMC connection, which enabled my continued “good standing” status of clergy credentials.

Our new-church-start venture was self-funded with equity from the sale of our Chicago condominium. The new ministry risk was personal. We started Bloom from scratch in a new town away from our home. We called it a parachute-drop, entrepreneurial new-church-start. We envisioned our mission as an independent Methodist demonstration site for a thriving church led by a gay clergy person. Our first activity was hosting a 10-week, in-home Bible study begun on September 18, 2002. We became active in the community through social groups and community events, gaining visibility and establishing relationships. Sunday morning worship gatherings began out of doors in a commercial rose garden on March 3, 2003. On June 26, 2004, we moved indoors at the nearby YMCA after the rose garden location was sold to land developers.

In 2004, the UMC General Conference spread additional restrictions against homosexual clergy throughout its ruling structures. The public news reports convinced

the Bloom congregation that the independent Methodist path was fruitless. The ministry would still offer welcome and healing to Methodists looking for an inclusive spiritual community, but ministry identity transitioned to the UCC due to the UMC's overbearing anti-gay thinking and polity.

The UCC was the better missional fit for Bloom's denominational affiliation. On October 25, 2005, the connection was approved at a regional gathering of UCC churches. Along with the fledgling congregation, a previously rejected gay pastor built and brought in a new UCC church. During the affiliation process, I was reconnected with someone central to the history of gay pastors.

Among the persons who gave me personal solace and professional support early in my Chicago years, and later when the Palm Springs church was seeking denominational affiliation, was the Rev. Dr. William R. Johnson (Bill). The LGBT Religious Archives Network ([lgbtran.org](http://lgbtran.org)) says Bill Johnson was the first openly gay person ordained in the UCC and the first such person ordained in the history of Christianity. His ordination on June 25, 1972, was authorized by the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California/Nevada Conference UCC.<sup>5</sup>

Approximately a decade later, as I was restarting my career in Chicago, Bill had occasion to be in town on business, and we met for the first time. He sat with me in a "boys town" show tunes bar and encouraged me to trust my abilities to survive and live life fully—even as my dreamed-of ministerial career seemed lost. About 20 years later,

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<sup>5</sup> William R. Johnson, "William R. Johnson • Profile • LGBT-RAN," accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=3>.

Bill helped again with a referral to the UCC Southern California Nevada Conference minister for advice on UCC affiliation, which led to Bloom's becoming UCC in 2005.

Bill retired from 40 years of national church executive ministry in 2012 and moved to Pilgrim Place, a UCC affiliated retirement community in Claremont, California. Following retirement, Bill kept a hand in ministry as he volunteered at Pilgrim Place and served with me on the local region's Eastern Association Church and Ministry

Committee Section A, which is the credentialing committee for UCC clergy authorization and church affiliation candidates. Having supper with Bill after one of the monthly committee meetings, I was surprised to learn from him that,



*Source: 1 Bill Johnson, Pilgrim Place*

despite his deep desire to be in in pastoral ministry, he was never able to get hired in the UCC as a church pastor. While the UCC set a precedent of inclusion by ordaining Bill in 1972, the congregational system provides autonomy for local churches to hire pastors through a search and call process of their own design. Such independence allows local search committees the right to exclude gay pastors from the local church hiring process.

While several historical Protestant Christian (once called mainline) denominations decided in recent decades to end universal exclusion of uncloseted homosexual pastors from their ordination process, the reality remains that churches hiring clergy via forms of search and call systems maintain power to reject gay pastors as candidates. The revelation about Bill Johnson and reports of non-inclusive denominational hiring practices are the inspirations for this D/P on welcoming gay pastors.

## **Problem**

Some historical American Protestant Christian denominations, notably the United Church of Christ (UCC), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Lutheran (ELCA), and some regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (DOC), now authorize the ordination of homosexual ministers. Therefore, more gay men in these denominations will graduate from seminary or become otherwise authorized to enter the hiring process as candidates. Hopefully, they will receive calls or appointments to local churches. Anecdotal observations show that already there are gay pastors leading Christian congregations throughout the church. Yet, official and unofficial barriers remain. News accounts and personal reports of homosexual pastor dismissals and ordination candidacy rejections continue to circulate. My story circulates with them.

## **Ecclesiastical Factors**

To set context for the negative actions affecting gay clergy, consider a brief look at ecclesial history. This will start with an American denomination rife with conflict about the issue from 1972 to 2019.

When the United Methodist Church (UMC) was formed in 1968 by merging The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, homosexuality was not mentioned in news reports about the beginning of this new Protestant denomination. The new church created a set of “Social Principles” to go along with foundational doctrine and legal codes. The church’s constitution and rules are compiled in *The Book of Discipline*, which is revised every four years. This review is completed by the General

Conference, a representative legislative meeting and the only body that can speak for the UMC.

An exception to the four-year cycle of global church legislative meetings was made in 2016. That year the Council of Bishops asked the General Conference to take all matters pertaining to homosexuality off that year's agenda and postpone consideration of homosexuality-related matters to a specially called General Conference in 2019. A Commission on a Way Forward was appointed by the 2016 conference to study this topic and bring recommendations to the bishops, which they would consider and move to the special conference agenda.

In the 1968 beginning of the UMC, homosexuality was not a topic in the UMC law sections of the new *Book of Discipline*. The topic first appeared in a set of Social Principles, which were understood to inform and support the work of the church in everyday life. In 1972, a working committee proposed including a "Human Sexuality" statement that read:

Although men and women are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sex between a man and a woman is to be clearly affirmed only in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitive within as well as outside marriage. We reject all sexual expressions which damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity, in the midst of diverse opinion as to what constitutes that enhancement. Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Don Hand, "Don Hand: Homosexuality and the 1972 Social Principles – Did the Conflict Begin with 'the Language'?", *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion & Democracy's Blog*, July 4, 2014,

By cumulative actions of subsequent General Conferences through 2016, that same section now reads:

We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex.

We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.<sup>7</sup>

The language change from 1972 to 2016 results from decades of ecclesiastical turmoil that began immediately following the publishing of the originally proposed wording. In 1972, after hours of debate, the General Conference added by amendment to

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accessed July 14, 2018, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2014/07/04/don-hand-homosexuality-and-the-1972-social-principles-did-the-conflict-begin-with-the-language/>.

<sup>7</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016*, 113.

the last sentence this one phrase: “though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

As visible above, this phrase no longer ends the paragraph. Change campaigns and legislative efforts have failed to remove or limit the exclusionary effect, and this language remains the primary catalyst for feelings and actions pertaining to the UMC’s treatment of homosexual persons. The later efforts to affirm the social worth of homosexuals and discourage discrimination against them in families and society do nothing to prevent the 1972 phrase from repeatedly hurting persons, thwarting senses of call, and ending careers.

The UMC example of legislative action and continual conflict is an indicator, which represents various actions of many church hierarchies. The official exclusionary bias of the UMC remains strong. The enforcement of anti-gay sentiment and official rules was strengthened further by votes of a Special Session of the General Conference in 2019, due in large part to the influence of Biblical fundamentalist majorities in non-United States elected delegations.<sup>9</sup> However, some Christian denominations reversed that course starting in the 1970s—the UCC, The Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the Presbyterian Church-USA (PCUSA). These few

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<sup>8</sup> Hand, “Juicy Ecumenism.”

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Williams and Elizabeth Dias, “United Methodists Tighten Ban on Same-Sex Marriage and Gay Clergy,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY, February 26, 2019), U.S. edition, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/us/united-methodists-vote.html>.

churches now welcome homosexuals into their professional ranks and promote inclusion to welcome them into the full life and leadership of their congregations.

Historical timelines for denominational inclusion of credentialed gay pastors vary just as denominations do. The Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the UCC authorized Bill Johnson to be ordained in 1972, as noted earlier. According to the congregational polity of the UCC, local associations of churches are the gatekeepers for clergy credentials. They comprise sections of the dozens of larger UCC regional conferences. Until all associations throughout the national church authorize gay pastors, Johnson's ordination does not deliver complete denominational change.

Because the congregational UCC is extremely decentralized, one cannot assume the entire UCC authorizes gay pastors. This was first made clear to me when, in personal conversation, I learned from the Rev. Michael Piazza, who had been the senior pastor of 4000-member Cathedral of Hope UCC in Dallas, Texas, that the church was not always welcome in the North Texas (local) Association. Cathedral of Hope was founded as a Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) congregation, but the denomination left over an administrative dispute, to function independently for several years as the self-described world's largest self-identified LGBTQ congregation. The leaders of the congregation wanted to establish UCC affiliation but exploring that relationship had to wait a few years while the regional governing association changed its bylaws to allow authorizing homosexual pastors. Cathedral of Hope in Dallas affiliated as the fourth largest UCC in the United States in 2007.

Following is a short compilation of historical events showing the various paths leading to credentialed gay pastors in three other denominations:

1. The hierarchical Episcopal Church in America opened slightly its ranks to gay clergy in 1976, when its national General Convention concurred that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.”<sup>10</sup> That was the beginning of public welcome, which led to openly gay pastors and the first uncloseted gay bishop consecrated in 2009, V. Gene Robinson. Furthermore, “in 2009, General Convention resolved that God’s call is open to all,”<sup>11</sup> which confirmed church-wide welcome.

2. Lutherans in the ELCA removed their restrictive policy toward gay pastors in August 2009. The Minneapolis-based *StarTribune* news media reported: “On a 559-451 vote taken Friday in Minneapolis at their biennial conference, delegates repealed the ELCA ban on gay clergy unless they agree to remain celibate. It makes ELCA, with 4.8 million members nationwide and 830,000 in Minnesota, the largest denomination in the country to welcome gays into the pulpits without restriction.”<sup>12</sup> In a denominationally

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<sup>10</sup> General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Minneapolis 1976* (New York: General Convention, 1977), C-109.

<sup>11</sup> The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, “LGBTQ in the Church (Episcopal),” Church Denomination, *Episcopal Church*, last modified July 1, 2013, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/lgbt-church>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Strickler, “ELCA Votes to Allow Gay Pastors,” *StarTribune* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 21, 2009), 10:42PM edition, accessed July 10, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/elca-votes-to-allow-gay-pastors/53859967/>.

unique action of restorative justice, the ELCA moved to reinstate pastors who were previously removed for being gay to the official clergy roster.<sup>13</sup>

3. In 2010, the PC(USA) General Assembly approved an amendment to allow ordination of openly LGBTQ ministers at the discretion of individual presbyteries and sessions (regional areas of authority), essentially allowing each congregation the decision to ordain or not. The national action had to be approved by a voting majority of 173 regional presbyteries, which occurred in 2011.<sup>14</sup>

In these examples of historic change, the social constant remains that qualified gay pastors have no guarantee they will be hired. Some congregations existentially inclined to call a gay pastor may defer since they lack experience welcoming gay leaders. Also, despite ecclesial advances in gay pastor welcome, anecdotes relayed to me by several gay pastors give witness to a residue of cultural resistance to them. A recent survey by a national faith-based welcoming organization reveals that such is the case even in publicly declared welcoming churches.

A 2016 survey by the Open and Affirming (ONA) Coalition, an advocacy ministry within the UCC, asked, “Is your ONA congregation served by an openly lesbian,

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<sup>13</sup> The Georgia Voice, *Gay Lutheran Pastors Discuss Reinstatement to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, News & Politics (Atlanta: The Georgia Voice, 2010), accessed June 29, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz3TWWcqixQ>.

<sup>14</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Approves Change in Ordination Standard,” Church Denomination, last modified May 10, 2011, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/10/presbyterian-church-us-approves-change-ordination/>.

gay, bisexual or transgender minister, or would you seriously consider calling an openly LGBTQ minister if that person were the best candidate?” With 541 respondents, 24% answered, “No.”<sup>15</sup> In this historic Protestant United States denomination, which passed a General Synod resolution in 1985 declaring the denomination to be in a “Covenant of Openness and Affirmation,” and endorsed equal marriage regardless of gender in 2005, only 1500 of the nearly 5000 UCC churches are self-declared ONA congregations.<sup>16</sup>

In June 2018, *Newsweek*'s website reported a survey conducted in May by BuzzFeed and Whitman Insight Strategies. They interviewed more than 880 LGBTQ persons in the United States. “While 39 percent of those polled said they had no religious affiliation whatsoever, more than half of the respondents said they were regularly involved in faith organizations. A majority of people who were religious were Christian, with 23 percent identifying as Protestant and 18 percent identifying as Catholic. Another 8 percent of those polled were Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist, and about 13 percent weren't sure when it came to religion.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Open and Affirming Coalition, “Take Our ONA Survey! How Does Your Church Compare?,” Real time Web-based Survey, *UCC Open and Affirming Coalition*, last modified Undated, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://openandaffirming.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Open and Affirming Coalition, “History (ONA),” Church Denomination, *UCC Open and Affirming Coalition*, accessed September 21, 2018, <https://openandaffirming.org/about/history/>.

<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Hutzler, “Most LGBTQ Adults Are Religious, Poll Finds; Members of the Community Say They’re Surprised,” *Newsweek*, June 17, 2018, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/lgbtq-gay-pride-catholic-church-religion-979966>.

The same survey reported their study sample was mostly under 40 years old. Given the common sight of grey hair and bald heads in historic Protestant churches, this presents an encouraging opportunity to welcome a younger demographic. It is also at odds with the present assumption noted in the same Newsweek article that most LGBTQ persons are not interested in church. This juxtaposition presents a dynamic that raises the possibility of dwindling participation in mainline protestant churches<sup>18</sup> might be slowed or staunches by welcoming faithful LGBTQ persons to churches led by gay clergy with whom they can identify.

Switching from United States national trends to global Christian trends is an opportunity to view a much broader phenomenon. Baylor University Professor Philip Jenkins is co-director of the Program on Historical Studies of Religion in Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion. He studies trends of growth in the world's major religions. He refers to the historical global Christian church as Christendom. He reports the "next Christendom" is developing as a result of emerging major shifts, happening in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in the geography of Christian influence. With the shift of growth in Christian churches from the global west to the global south, theological strictures born of British Colonialism and American missionary evangelism continue to foster the adopted myths of anti-gay Christianity. In cultures where gay persons were

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<sup>18</sup> Ed Stetzer, "If It Doesn't Stem Its Decline, Mainline Protestantism Has Just 23 Easters Left," *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC, April 28, 2017), sec. Acts of Faith - Perspective, accessed July 15, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/?utm\\_term=.9cf49cfcc403](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/?utm_term=.9cf49cfcc403).

once incorporated in regular society, the Christian missionary influenced prohibitions and discrimination remain potent despite changes of social attitudes in the United States.<sup>19</sup> While anti-gay propositions on another continent seem out of range to affect American churches seeking new clergy, the stream of historical anti-gay bigotry flowing through media and cultures is nourished in the United States by the slow transformation of global mores.

Jenkins says the next Christendom will thrive in future decades as it grows exponentially in the global south. Conservative Catholicism and fundamentalist Pentecostalism will be the two main drivers there. Recent decades of conservative religious opposition to ordination of women and gays, same-sex marriage, and abortion show that conservative fundamentalist rejection of gay pastors is influential globally. This fundamentalist rejection permeates media and culture, the effect of which reinforces the negative messages emanating from churches.

Quantitative social scientist David Voas says in a British TEDx Talk, delivered in 2015, that western religion is in decline, and there is no way back. He bases his prediction on two trends: the secular transition of society and the lack of generational replacement.<sup>20</sup> Statistics that measure belonging, believing, participation in services, and how important it is felt to be, lead him to say Western religion is losing ground in Europe

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<sup>19</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.

<sup>20</sup> David Voas, *Why There Is No Way Back for Religion in the West* (University of Essex: TEDx Talks, 2015), accessed October 25, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtAR\\_OGzleg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtAR_OGzleg).

and the United States. The assumption that the United States is religiously stronger than Europe is not borne out by recent measurements. In fact, the United States is following the European trend. The trend results from people getting more secure and prosperous so they do not feel the need for religion to feel less vulnerable. The acceleration of this trend continues as the generational transfer of religious values has diminished. He says older generations were the main source of the transfer of religious values to children. But the transference is diminished: "...We see a sharp generational gradient from something like two-thirds of the oldest generation saying that these beliefs are very important to them and that drops down to something like one in five for the youngest adult generations."<sup>21</sup> This is very hard to recover from since the younger people do not feel a natural urge to go to religious services. "...You have to be raised with religion to find it natural."<sup>22</sup> The barriers to younger generations joining or returning to religious groups are largely institutionally built and publicly broadcast, according to Voas. "To the extent the people have any contact with religion, it's often in news stories about extremism or abuse or intolerance and that's simply not conducive for religious revival."<sup>23</sup>

Voas presents a discouraging vision of the future for persons who think religion is a force for good. For religion in the West, welcoming gay pastors will not stop the decline in its tracks. But, counteracting actions of abuse and intolerance with ones of healing and inclusion may slow it down.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

The above ecclesiastical factors and trends are indicators of problems facing gay pastors as they seek careers in local churches. There are historical-political factors that have a bearing on how gay pastors are perceived, as well.

### **Historical-Political Factors**

The anti-gay mores of American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which accompany congregation members to meetings and worship, started gaining strength more than 100 years ago. Bruce Bawer in *Stealing Jesus, How Fundamentalism betrays Christianity*, presents an extensive historical review of movements that led to the rise of evangelical fundamentalism with its 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century influence on church practices affecting public morality. Bawer sets the distinction between "...Church of Law and Church of Love to describe the two different ecclesiastical ideals toward which the Christians in these respective categories strive – remembering always, of course that every church and every human soul has within it a degree of legalism and a capacity for love."<sup>24</sup> He draws a distinction between legalistic churches and grace-oriented churches to set a binary understanding of the major purposes of Christian mission in the United States.

Am I suggesting that conservative Christians are without love or that liberal Christians are lawless? No. I merely make this distinction: conservative Christianity understands a Christian to be someone who subscribes to have specific set of theological propositions about God in the afterlife, and who profess to believe that by subscribing to those propositions, accepting Jesus Christ as Savior, and (except in the case of the most extreme separatist fundamentalists)

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), 6.

evangelizing, he or she evades God's wrath and wins salvation (for Roman Catholics, good works also count); liberal Christianity, meanwhile, tends to identify Christianity with the experience of God's abundant love and with the commandment to love God and one's neighbor. If, for conservative Christians, outreach generally means zealous proselytizing of the 'unsaved,' for a liberal Christians it tends to mean social programs directed at those in need.<sup>25</sup>

The American Christian church began with the Pilgrims and Puritans from England immigrating to the colonies in 1620. Sources abound documenting the presence of religious influence in early New England's social development. More than a century later, as the newly independent nation took shape, leaders expressed support for religious pluralism. In 1789, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed freedom of religious expression but it did not make any religious expression compulsory. Bawer writes that America's first president, George Washington, "didn't care which religion immigrants to the United States might profess: 'If they are good workmen, ...they may be Mohammedans, Jews, or Christian of any sect, or they may be atheists.'"<sup>26</sup> Bawer presents a survey of the founders' religious views and concludes that they "placed less emphasis on any theological doctrine than they did on Jesus' gospel message of love."<sup>27</sup>

Bawer presents social statistics that show religious participation in the colonies was at a rate of 17 percent at the time of American Revolution and grew to 62 percent in 1980. Despite generally accepted assumptions that all Colonial settlers, including the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 71.

Pilgrims and the Puritans, were ardent church goers, census figures show their general participation never exceeded 22 percent. During the Civil War in the mid-1800s, the number was 37 percent.<sup>28</sup> Bawer's research compiles a thorough look at the development of Protestant religious thinking, leaders, and growth patterns. It presents a steady branching of the Christian church in America, but Bawer is highly critical of the tree's fruit:

These new sects varied widely in doctrine, but most of them had something significant in common: If the original Protestant Reformation and the later Baptist and Methodist movements have been born out of longings for a Church of Love and not of Law, these nineteenth-century sects tended to be founded by legalists who, offended by the degree of decrease in legalism among the mainline Protestant churches and terrified by evolution, the Higher Criticism, and other manifestations of modern life and modern science, sought to establish newer, stricter Churches of Law – churches whose walls, so to speak, were high and strong enough to protect them, and their doctrine of servitude, from a world full of ambiguity and doubt.<sup>29</sup>

The progression of Protestant legalism, from colonial Congregationalists through many forms of fundamentalism and the rise of Pentecostalism to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became solidly operative in American culture in the early 20th century. Bawer presents a particular technological advancement that made the difference.

Why, in the twentieth century, did mainline churches dwindle and legalistic churches prosper? One reason: the advent of mass communications. Tent meeting revivals had been a fact of rural life well into the first quarter of the century, and made national celebrities of people like Billy Sunday and Amy Semple McPherson; as late as 1927, two years after the Scopes trial, Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry* took on the vulgarity, hypocrisy, and emotional manipulation practiced by tent meeting evangelists. But radio rendered tent meetings obsolete; the mass audience that traveling evangelists had reached could now be addressed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 87.

en masse by radio ministers like Charles E. Fuller. Fuller knew how to speak to that audience. He knew that the radio audience, like the tent meeting crowds, didn't want to be helped to reflect intelligently on God and to attain a profound personal experience of the numinous; they wanted a preacher who set forth clearly what they had to do to feel part of a group of people who believe the same things, share the same values, and follow the same orders.<sup>30</sup>

The proliferation of legalistic Christianity stemming from the radio audiences who consumed the fundamentalist preaching began to permeate local congregations even before the radio was invented. The attitudes of many people about what the Christian message and mission entailed were shifting based on the teachings of an Englishman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: John Nelson Darby. Bawer's survey of historical literature leads him to conclude Darby's devotion to dispensational premillennialism (focus on second coming of Christ, final judgement, rapture, etc.) is the shift in the focus of Christian thinking that propelled legalism to 20<sup>th</sup> century prominence.<sup>31</sup>

Bawer traces the growth and influence of millennialism through many 19<sup>th</sup> century sects into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through the Second Great Awakening, and eventually the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition in American politics. Socially conservative theological ideals passed from church to politics to civil influence. Intense reactions to the tumult of social upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s motivated conservatives to mobilize for the 1980s. Under the guise of religious programming, Jerry Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" and Pat Robertson's "700 Club" delivered the blend of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 83.

conservative evangelical Christianity and right-wing socio-political values via the radio's successor, television.<sup>32</sup>

Television-inspired conservative Christianity's socio-political influence was strong enough to sideline a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher and president named Jimmy Carter, elected in 1976, and replace him with one approved as truly conservative: self-declared Presbyterian, Ronald Reagan in 1980. Three and a half decades later, after a streak of socially progressive civil rights advances for homosexuals and others in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, mostly white evangelicals rejected the validity of the Christian views expressed by former UCC member President Barrack Obama. At the end of Obama's two terms, Donald Trump, who identified as conservative and Presbyterian, won the 2016 electoral college victory with slight margins in typically liberal states. The socially progressive United Methodist candidate, Hillary Clinton, who was leading in the polls up to Election Day, was defeated in the stunning results. Among other conservative messaging, candidate Trump's repeated pledge to appoint conservative judges motivated most of the evangelical backing. The appeal of legalism rose to prevail over the progressive agenda that had been unfolding in the early 2000s.

The persistence of legalistic theology and social conservatism influencing institutions in the United States is a factor in the attitudes that permeate social communities. The media perpetuates this phenomenon still. A 2012 multi-year, multi-platform research study conducted by the University of Missouri Center on Religion &

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 297.

the Professions found: “The framing of religious voices in the media begins with the predominance of conservative evangelical religious spokespeople, whose skillful and intentional use of the media has gone hand in glove with their rise to political power over the last thirty years in the United States.”<sup>33</sup>

The presence of conservative views in the media is a significant influencer for the public, including church congregation members. The media is often more influential than the church in forming perspectives based on religious tenets. “One might question whether the media, as a relatively recent institution, really has significant definitional power over religious faiths that have been around for centuries or even millennia, but the reality is that modern Americans are not well informed about religion, even the religions that they profess.”<sup>34</sup> The media is able to persuade and influence audiences with a message that is repetitious and it sounds right, which is a persuasive technique used since the days of Aristotle. With no internalized religious understanding to counter the external legalistic religious meaning, the latter prevails.

Media messages fall into framing patterns. For topics that are related to the LGBTQ communities, the study found that the frames were mostly negative. “The kind of imbalance noted in this study—the use of a “gays versus religion” frame—does not do justice to the increasing religious pluralism in America, (it) minimizes the presence of

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<sup>33</sup> Debra L. Mason, PhD and Cathy Ellen Rosenholtz, *Missing Voices: A Study of Religious Voices in Mainstream Media Reports about LGBT Equality* (University of Missouri Center on Religion & the Professions, April 11, 2012), 6, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://www.glaad.org/publications/missingvoices>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

pro-gay religious voices and ignores those who identify as both LGBT and religious, particularly those who identify as Christian.”<sup>35</sup>

This provides a reasonable basis to conclude that congregational reticence to hire gay pastors in local churches—even when denominations promote inclusion—is motivated by national media messages framed by conservative and legalistic theologies. Gay pastors are hindered by that messaging before their credentials are reviewed or candidating sermons heard.

This systemic exclusion of gay pastors is the problem to solve. Change will occur when the negative messages are countered with the witness of gay pastors doing positive ministry. Such change is complex, slow, and often ambiguous. The sought-after goal of this D/P is that hiring covenants with gay pastors will be more readily entered, validated, and nurtured.

### **Looking Ahead**

Throughout this D/P, personal experience integrates with research, gay pastor interviews, and the project’s findings. The material and experiences provide guidance to gay pastors approaching new jobs and their hiring congregations. They will reap the benefit of those who have already been hired into local churches as the first openly gay pastor. It is expected that this D/P will also help persons on search committees lower defensive barriers to make hiring covenants with gay pastors. In addition to the video

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 20.

interviews, the web-based resource includes a basic plan for orientation meetings the month before arrival of the new gay pastor and his first six months into the job.

Though the resource is focused on the limited seven-month time frame of the arrival of the hired gay pastor, the project's findings may be helpful outside that time frame. Also, the focus on gay male pastors is a limitation for the sake of focus. Many issues a gay pastor faces now are faced by women and people of color as they seek jobs in parish work. I am aware anecdotally of several instances and issues across the diversity spectrum that inform this study. This project is intentionally limited to focus on producing something to facilitate the hiring of gay pastors in local churches.

Chapter Two is entitled "Social Analysis." The local church is where the pastor serves the congregation in the context of society. Churches embody systems in force that a newly arriving pastor needs to anticipate and reveal. Chapter Two notes the work of congregation development, family systems, adaptive action, and psychological change theories to equip the arriving pastor with tools to begin building relationships and learning the nature and function of the hiring local church. Various theologies and polities are present and influential in local church settings. A few will be presented as a basis of comparison and support to interact with the theologies found among the members of the local congregation. Various polities will be explored lightly to provide a basis to relate to the church politics of the local setting. Emphasis will be on family systems theory as a key methodology for navigating the established system in the local church.

Chapter Three delivers "The Project." In addition to presenting information from the research and interview transcripts, the "7 Monthly Meetups" plan is incorporated into

the website, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), which is yoked to a YouTube channel entitled “Gay Pastor Welcome.” These resources are available to the public.

Chapter Four presents “Conclusions.” Findings are presented considering the feedback received thus far. Since the D/P web presence will remain beyond graduation – for as long as it remains current and useful – the feedback continues after D/P submission. An integration of research, theory, and theology show how it is hoped people will use these resources in the future. A statement of impact presents how the project helps gay pastors begin ministry with sure footing in new jobs. Some concerns or cautions the D/P raised are included. Finally, there are listed some joys and thanksgivings inspired by the completion of this project.

## **Chapter 2**

### **SOCIAL ANALYSIS**

The social analysis of getting to the goal of ‘sticking the landing’ for the new gay pastor beginning his tenure is hooked into the context in and around the new congregation. The local church is the context where a pastor meets the congregation in society. When a pastor and congregation enter covenant, the mission they consent to embody becomes the mutual focus for their ministry. Activities include offering times for divine worship, providing pastoral care, fostering a nurturing community, developing opportunities for community relationships and service, and developing educational gatherings to edify the faithful. But the mission of a church can be diverted to other matters when differences arise. Various systems of church life can become incubators and catalysts for conflict and stagnation within the local church. This chapter considers a wide selection of theories, systems, and social dynamics factors that may affect the newly hired gay pastor’s success in early months.

This D/P is not presenting a survey of academic literature, because the seminars, research, and field experience in the executive leadership track were not directly linked to LGBTQ issues. The SFTS academic experience, accompanied by insights and applications acquired by me as a church-planter since 2002, and a businessperson in sales and marketing for 20 years before that, are applicable and adaptable. What follows is a selection of resources applicable to gay pastors and members of the congregations they may serve.

The topics in the sections that follow are not usually found in typical congregational development literature. This is understandable since welcoming gay

pastors is not yet a common consideration. My experience as a pastor since 2002, suggests that congregations are most open to concepts and ideas that are new and unusual. The key to a gay pastor's acceptance is the usefulness, ingenuity, and authenticity of fresh and atypical thinking.

### **Local Church Experience**

When any pastor is hired and arrives to serve a new congregation, there are people to meet and systems to learn. Making the transition into the new job is a task that covers many topics and experiences. The Rev. Bill Ingraham came to his latest job already having served several churches as their first-time gay pastor. He expressed how he went about it this way:

For me, the first six months is really about ... I started to say, "Ingratiating," that's not the term I want to use. Familiarizing, connecting myself to the church. The better I do at getting to know names, going to every single committee, getting to every single home bound person, trying to discern the dynamic of the congregation, the personality the congregation, the stuff beyond the profile. I have never had a church that I served that the profile was 100% true, because my experience as a total outsider is different from their experience as a total insider. And at the end of six months you are both an insider, you've been there a little bit, but you're still an outsider, you've not been there very long. And so, it really is a moment to step back and look and say, "Have I done it? Have I landed right? Am I in the right place?" And also, to get a sense of what the work is that you have before you.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bill Ingraham, "Video Interview with the Rev. William H. Ingraham, First Church Congregational UCC, Methuen, Massachusetts," Video, August 9, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

Note: All additional references to the website video interviews are found at [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

The familiarization practices described by Bill imply that some factors are not obvious in the hiring and arrival process. Furthermore, there are unanticipated factors and systems functioning in every congregation. My experience and research raise several of these for consideration.

In the congregation that fired me in 1981, in my subsequent congregational experiences as a suspended pastor, and 21 years later as the co-founder of an intentionally LGBTQ-inclusive start-up church, I listened to fears expressed regularly about gay pastors serving in or being hired by local churches. What I heard is widespread. Key themes expressed were: “We’ll lose members,”<sup>37</sup> and “We’ll become a ‘gay church.’”<sup>38</sup> There was also a common expression of unfounded catastrophic thinking brought on by unfettered anxiety due to a general change or isolated incident. “It will ruin our church,” might be how congregants expressed their broadest speculation.

Such fear-based comments arise from the previously noted influences of systemic discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Homophobia and heterosexism, family systems, and personal responses based on experience and/or perceptions contribute to these fears. Anti-gay church and political actions reported in the media and perpetuated on social media add to the impact.

Expressions of unrealistic positive expectations arise, too. The most common in my experience seems to be, “This will bring in the gays,” which reveals a sometimes-

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<sup>37</sup> David Paul Bahr, “Openly Gay and Lesbian Pastors Called by Predominantly Straight UCC Congregations” (Doctor of Ministry Research Paper, Wesley Theological Seminary, 2006), 50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

desperate hope that a gay pastor will stimulate increased Sunday attendance, group participation, and financial contributions. Common sense concludes none of these outcomes are guaranteed when a church hires a gay pastor. The availability of research materials pertaining to the topic of gay pastors serving in local churches is scarce. Yet, at least one research paper shows positive results are more common than not.

In 2006, David Paul Bahr wrote his Doctor of Ministry research thesis: *Openly Gay and Lesbian Pastors Called by Predominantly Straight UCC Congregations*. Through surveys mailed to qualified serving pastors referred for and requesting inclusion in the study, Bahr measured several outcomes of parish performance often attributed to effective pastoral leadership. He concluded: “This study of 62 (UCC) churches finds that they have fared statistically better than the UCC (generally) on matters of membership, worship attendance, Sunday school attendance and stewardship. It finds that despite fears articulated by members, these congregations often experienced revitalization that reversed or slowed years of decline.”<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, in 1997, Doctor of Ministry degree candidate the Rev. Jane Heckles examined the stewardship trends of UCCs on record as Open and Affirming churches, i.e., welcoming LGBTQ members as full participants in the life of the congregation. The paper’s premise was not based on gay pastors in the subject churches’ ministerial leadership. However, the finding is noteworthy to this study because it may quell the stereotypical fear found among some congregants that welcoming churches lose money

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 2.

because LGBTQs in church drive people away. Bahr referenced Heckles in his thesis; her paper was no longer generally available; I contacted Heckles, whom I know as a Southern California UCC clergy colleague. In conversation, she confirmed the study and conclusion, as described in the paper's abstract:

This project demonstrates that United Church of Christ congregations that accept and affirm homosexual and bisexual persons fully in their corporate life and ministry do not suffer a decline in financial support from members. Research among the 204 Open and Affirming UCC congregations, conducted through a survey questionnaire, revealed that Open and Affirming congregations record higher contribution rates and stronger membership growth than national averages for the UCC.<sup>40</sup>

While both papers, Heckles (1997) and Bahr (2006), are somewhat dated, and the findings may not be universal, they bring good news to congregational leaders considering and preparing for their first hire of a gay pastor.

### **Homophobia and Heterosexism**

Among the many factors functioning socially and personally in church congregations are the effects of heterosexism and homophobia. Heterosexism is commonly defined as the belief and operating perspective that heterosexuality is superior to other forms of sexuality. Homophobia is commonly understood as the fear of or distaste for homosexuality and homosexuals, which causes anti-gay actions in various aspects of human society. In the quest for rights and respect for homosexuals, one of the

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<sup>40</sup> Jane Elizabeth Heckles, "Stewardship Trends in Open and Affirming Churches of the United Church of Christ" (DMin thesis, Andover Newton Theological School, 1997).

ways to seek equality is to dispel heterosexism and homophobia through education and activism.

One of the tools for education helpful to a gay pastor and his new congregation is *Sexually Stigmatized Communities: Reducing Heterosexism and Homophobia: An Awareness Training Manual*. Author and educator Chuck Stewart, Ph.D., developed this program as a training course to help professional organizations remove factors that hinder their service in communities that include the LGBTQ persons. To set the context, Stewart writes, “Although heterosexism is hidden and not a direct form of discrimination, it is the core motivating force in the institutionalism of antigay laws for policies in government, religion, schools, and other agents of societal norm enforcement.”<sup>41</sup> Heterosexism is defined as the condition in effect when heterosexuality (or “being straight”) is considered the normative biological sexual orientation in human society. Heterosexual privilege, also known as the heteronormative assumption, is why and how gay people are considered deviant – even when laws protect them, and rights are ascribed to them. Homophobia, as previously defined, is often thought to be the reason for discrimination. However, the cause for discrimination against gay people in each situation may not be fear induced, but rather privilege invoked.

Gay pastors arriving in new locations for new jobs may choose to assess the level of homophobia by checking feelings among church staff, the congregation, and community associates. The Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones was hired as the senior minister of a

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<sup>41</sup> Chuck Stewart, *Sexually Stigmatized Communities: Reducing Heterosexism and Homophobia: An Awareness Training Manual*, 1st ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), 221.

“tall steeple,” large staff church in Omaha, Nebraska. In his video interview, answering Question 9, he relayed his initial experience with existing staff:

I don't remember ever asking any of them what they specifically thought about my being gay. In fact, the only time that may have been explicitly become (sic) conversation would've been after I arrived, and there was some discussion of, "Oh, there were three people who voted no, and here's who they are," and some of the staff talking about some of the people who had some concerns and come and talked to them or to the interim minister. So, the staff was probably helpful in knowing who I needed to extend pastoral care to and who were the people that might need a little more attention than others. If anything, they seemed to express their enthusiasm. As I said, even about the congregation, (sic) seemed to celebrate that it was doing this new thing, so I think the staff was for that. Then I think the way that the staff became fully comfortable with me was just doing my job and doing my job well, I hope.<sup>42</sup>

For his work in developing homophobia reduction workshops for police academies and other public service agencies, Stewart developed a topic paper on recognizing homophobia in various communities: “Characteristics of Homophobes and How to Assess When Homophobia Has Been Reduced.” For this one-page resource, he used two sources (Herrick and Riddle) primarily as noted below:

Gregory Herrick identified nine characteristics of people found to be homophobic:

1. Less likely to have had personal contact with lesbians and gay men;
2. Less likely to report having engaged in homosexual behaviors or to identify themselves as lesbian or gay;
3. More likely to perceive their peers as manifesting negative attitudes, especially if the respondents are males;
4. More likely to have resided in areas where these negative attitudes are the norm (e.g., the midwestern and southern United States, Canadian prairies, and in rural areas and small towns), especially during adolescence;
5. Likely to be older and less well educated (sic);
6. More likely to be religious, to attend church frequently, and to subscribe to a conservative religious ideology;

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<sup>42</sup> Scott Jones, “Interview with The Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones, First Central Congregational UCC, Omaha, Nebraska,” Video, August 16, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

7. More likely to express traditional, restrictive attitudes about sex roles;
8. Less permissive sexually or manifesting more guilt or negativity about sexuality;
9. More likely to manifest high levels of authoritarianism and related personality characteristics.

In general, heterosexuals are more negative about homosexuals of their same sex, with stronger attitudes showing in males. Homophobia does not exist in a vacuum and researchers have found a correlation between homophobia and negative attitudes toward women, and homophobia and negative attitudes toward Blacks.

How do we know when homophobia has been reduced? Lesbians and gays seek acceptance, yet that too can be a form of prejudice because it implies that there is indeed something to accept. (Dr. Dorothy) Riddle suggested looking for positive attitudes (instead of negative attitudes) to determine if homophobia has been reduced:

1. Support – People agreed to work for and support gay rights as they would any other group that experiences discrimination.
2. Admiration – Acknowledgment that being gay or lesbian takes enormous strength and courage.
3. Appreciation – Gays and lesbians are appreciated for their contribution to diversity.
4. Nurturance – Gays and lesbians are viewed to be indispensable in our society.<sup>43</sup>

Using the aforementioned resources, the gay pastor will be able to ascertain homophobic attitudes toward homosexual persons in his community. Depending on what is observed, he may enjoy the lack of homophobia present or determine a pathway to navigate whatever homophobia is evident. Common experience suggests homophobia typically is present to some extent in most communities. The degree of intolerant behavior a gay pastor must engage will vary. In choosing how to respond to intrinsic and public

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<sup>43</sup> Stewart, *Sexually Stigmatized Communities: Reducing Heterosexism and Homophobia: An Awareness Training Manual*, 188.

homophobia, social and spiritual support from the local congregation is essential, along with peer support from colleagues.

*Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, presents multiple authors on the topic with a wide variety of subjects. The following insights from select chapters are a compilation of ideas applicable for a gay pastor's arrival and start.

In Part 1's first chapter, "Thinking Critically/Intervening Effectively," James T. Sears offers definitions of homophobia, internalized homophobia, and heterosexism. For homophobia, he credits the word's creator, George Weinberg. Weinberg's definition from the early 1970s included conditions for dread, revulsion, antagonism toward, as well as desires to punish, homosexuals. Sears defines internalized homophobia



Source: 2 Allendale UMC responded to hate graffiti by surrounding it with love. Posted to their Facebook page September 2018, used with permission.

as "the conscious or subconscious adoption and acceptance of negative feelings and attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality by gay men and lesbians." For the purposes of the book, the editors defined homophobia as "prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities...evidenced in a deep-seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex."<sup>44</sup> Sears defines heterosexism as a "belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality

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<sup>44</sup> James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams, eds., *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, Between men--between women (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 16.

evidenced by exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events, or activities.”<sup>45</sup>

The task of reducing homophobic feelings in persons is not easy. Sears presents several examples of studies and training events intended to measure reduction after such events. There is not much continuity in the results. A few instances noting reduction in homophobia measurements occurred from a small number of programs that included role playing and personal engagement.<sup>46</sup> As noted in a later chapter, deep-seated fears and prejudices are not easily dislodged. When gay pastors encounter community-based homophobia, it will be more from experience than education that the negative presence of homophobia is reduced.

The Rev. Dr. William R. (Bill) Johnson is noted earlier in this paper as the first open and unapologetic gay person ordained by a historic, mainline Christian denomination. He was ordained in 1972, in the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the UCC. He personally faced severe opposition, as well as wonderful support. In order to survive the opposition internally, he developed a perspective and technique for not only coping but thriving. In his video interview responding to Questions 16 and 17, pertaining to internal and external homophobia, he said:

Internally, I would say that I have always loved myself. I have always been ... I was always taught, as a child, that I had an inherent worth and was not only worthy of God's love, but that I was surrounded by it. Along the way, I also

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 27.

developed internal resources, spiritual resources for self-sustenance and for maintaining a positive self-esteem in even the most difficult contexts. With regard to the society prejudices that I encountered, and there were a lot, and they came very early, and I used to ... Whenever I did speaking on behalf of the Gay Caucus, I realized that it was important for me to not receive the negativity and the really hostile comments that people almost ridiculously felt free to make. And so, I established, in my mind, an alter ego who stood beside me to receive all that negativity and all of those comments. And my point of view, my position was this person couldn't possibly be saying these things to me because this person doesn't even know me. So, my alter ego is going to receive all that so that I can respond in a humane and loving way to this person despite their ignorance and their fear and the really ugly things that they are saying.<sup>47</sup>

In the chapter from *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia* entitled “Changing Homophobic Attitudes and Heterosexist Attitudes: An Overview of Persuasive Communication Approaches,” Gus A. Yep begins by declaring, “People are not born homophobic or heterosexist.” He writes further, “Homophobic and heterosexist attitudes are, therefore, learned, shaped, and maintained through communication.”<sup>48</sup> The chapter proceeds to provide several communication theories and strategies that may help reduce the incidents and effects of homophobic and heterosexist actions against the marginalized population. For anyone deciding to consult or confront the persons expressing homophobia and heterosexism, including dealing with it in one’s self, Yep counsels an observation to give careful consideration:

... There is a need to find out the degree of ego involvement people have regarding their attitudes toward lesbians and gays. For certain individuals who are not highly ego involved, attitude change is more likely. For those who are highly

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<sup>47</sup> William Johnson, “Video Interview with The Rev. Dr. William R. Johnson, First Openly Gay Man Ordained in the UCC, 1972,” Video, July 12, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

<sup>48</sup> Sears and Williams, *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*, 49–50.

ego involved, this process of change will likely be very difficult. Perhaps not much time and energy should be wasted in trying to change these individuals' attitudes.<sup>49</sup>

In her chapter from *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*, entitled “Challenging Representations of Sexuality,” Diane DuBose Brunner writes, “Fixed ways of seeing the world offer a good deal of security, and, therefore, this kind of containment is extremely difficult to disrupt.”<sup>50</sup> DuBose expressed that observation based on her experience as a literature professor who decided to include in her syllabus James T. Sears’ 1991 book *Growing up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit*. In reaction to this book alone, “Many students did not come to class during the entire five class periods in which we discussed Sears’ text.”<sup>51</sup> This fact is included here to recognize that, regardless of the positive qualities of the persons involved and work performed, and because of the residual negative attitudes in society regarding LGBTQ communities, some persons will self-select out of engagement. To put it another way, “people will vote with their feet.” At the close of her chapter, the author reflected on the outcomes of the five sessions and the work by the remainder of students. “The work of this course challenged sexual representations and in doing so, also challenged homophobia/heterosexism; other sacred assumptions were profoundly challenged as well.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 171.

It literally shook things loose, and that, for many students, was disarming. That it was disarming is perhaps the best indication that something positive happened.”<sup>52</sup>

The only specifically church-related information in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia* is in “Part V: Working Within Institutions.” Louie Crew wrote, “Changing the Church: Lessons Learned in the Struggle to Reduce Institutional Heterosexism in the Episcopal Church.” Blending his observations and experiences gained in the movements for women to be ordained and consecrated as American Episcopal bishops with LGBTQ inclusion as ordained clergy, Crew reports his actions in the work. The long journey, begun in the 1970s, benefitted from the interconnection of both movements. Affirming women bishops intrinsically included lesbians, which led to homosexuals in leadership being affirmed in some cases by default. This later paved the way for more official affirmation of homosexuals as “children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the church.”<sup>53</sup>

Based on the historical events observed and the efforts extended to be present and participating wherever matters and issues of inclusion were being considered, the principle tactic for success appears to be relationship building. In the Christian parlance of incarnation, what it took to be successful in changing the church to include gays and lesbians as clergy, was to show up. Crew writes: “One of the reasons gays and lesbians have succeeded in the Episcopal Church is that we spend time learning how it operates,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 343.

and then we teach one another. Almost every one of our leaders knows who's who in the Church in her diocese, in her parish, and in the Episcopal Church Center. We know how to serve these people.”<sup>54</sup>

Heterosexism and homophobia are present in almost every context of church and society. Learning and admitting that is a first step toward ending the conditions. While welcoming a gay pastor, acknowledging the work that needs to be done to counteract homophobia and heterosexism will enable an open and productive start to the covenantal relationship. The Rev. C. Dale Jackson said as much in his interview when asked Questions 9 and 10, about checking the feelings of his small staff: “The only thing that I have felt from the staff is support. But I think that I got that support not because I'm a gay man, but because I was supportive of them and their roles and championed them to other people. I earned their respect in that way.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Cross Cultural Hires**

Bringing gay pastors serving primarily non-gay churches into the academic arena is a relatively new movement. The depth of research available is shallow. Gay culture and ecclesiastical process are seldom compared. As noted previously, the gay pastor will be crossing cultural delineations as his presence signals and implements change in the experience and expectations of the hiring parish. This D/P purposely presents findings

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>55</sup> C. Dale Jackson, “Video Interview with the Rev. C. Dale Jackson, Riverside Presbyterian Church, Riverside, Illinois,” Video, August 8, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

from other cultural realms as applicable to the conditions unfolding in the new gay pastor's arrival.

The Rev. Ron Buford arrived in Sunnyvale, California, as a recently ordained, second career, UCC African American gay pastor. He noted in his video interview that he considered his identity as he came to the new job. Answering Question 2, referencing the risks and rewards he anticipated in the new job, he said, "In as much as being African American is an issue, on top of that, being gay, you know, and I've decided that I'm just me, so I was not going to go in the closet or tone anything down."<sup>56</sup>

Lucia Ann McSpadden developed a study guide for cross-cultural-cross-racial clergy appointments titled, *Meeting God at the Boundaries: A Manual for Church Leaders*. The work emphasized recognizing and overcoming cultural hurdles resulting from racial and geographic regional differences. The findings and methods relating to cross-cultural clergy leadership skills may be credibly applied to situations of the first gay pastor arriving at a local church.

A clarion point is made when McSpadden writes: "First impressions are our first opinion and tend to influence us strongly. Thus (sic) we need to be exceptionally cautious and perceptive about first impressions; they can lead us astray."<sup>57</sup> Numerous factors and ingredients are fomenting as clergy-church first impressions are made. A varying sum of

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<sup>56</sup> Ron Buford, "Video Interview with the Rev. Ron Buford, Congregational Church of Sunnyvale - UCC, Sunnyvale, California," Video, August 27, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

<sup>57</sup> Lucia Ann McSpadden, *Meeting God at the Boundaries: A Manual for Church Leaders* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2003), 30.

theological and cultural factors resulting from personal experiences, relationships, and educational standing are present. This creates the reality that the established congregation and the new gay pastor are stepping into together.

In *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Roman Catholic theologians and social justice advocates Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, define social analysis as “the effort to obtain a more complete picture of a social situation by exploring its *historical and structural relationships*. Social analysis serves as a tool that permits us to grasp the reality with which we are dealing....”<sup>58</sup> The discussion of topics that follow in this paper reflect historical and structural relationships factoring in the conditions facing a newly hired gay pastor arriving to serve the local church.

Existing systems, attitudes, and perspectives are at work when new pastors arrive. Anticipating these elements helps the pastor and church covenant to coalesce early in the relationship. When relationships, history, conditions, and operating principles functioning both outwardly and in the background are mutually recognized and engaged, the new pastor and the congregation can begin their mission jointly with great potential for good.

Some factors are obvious upon arrival. Others arise later, even several years later. Some factors are communicated by persons who welcome and orient the new pastor. Others are discovered during the parish leadership experience and from community feedback. In his 2012 blog post, “Out and Ordained,” Brett Webb-Mitchell writes:

I experienced the cold hand of oppression when I came out of my closet and lived as one created in the image of God, part of God’s beloved community. There were

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<sup>58</sup> Joe Holland and Peter J Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 14.

a handful of Presbyterian pastors who were out LGBTQ people before we Presbyterians amended our constitution. The reason no formal complaint was brought against me was because I was part of a Presbytery where powerful people protected me as an out gay pastor. There was an informal “underground railroad,” where those in authority shielded us from prosecution but could not assure us employment. After I came out, First Presbyterian Church of Henderson (North Carolina), called me as their interim senior pastor, and I served the church until they called their new pastor. In Henderson I met unbridled malevolence toward LGBTQ people in middle-class America. While most church members accepted my presence in the pulpit, some struggled with my sexual orientation. One church member wrote this on a survey near the end of my term: “Every biblical reference to homosexuality indicates it is not an ‘alternate life style,’(sic) but gross sin.” On the town blog, “Home in Henderson,” someone wrote: “To blatantly live such a lifestyle that God terms an abomination and further adds insult to injury (sic). And he calls himself a minister without admitting the sin in his life? Sick, sick, sick.”<sup>59</sup>

Understanding the functioning local values of the congregation and experiences facing the gay pastor and congregation enhances the possibility of doing effective ministry together. In cases of cultural foreshadowing, stereotypes become patterns for first impressions that will last or be broken during the gay pastor’s tenure. As the following section presents, this is an area where persons, including gay men, may learn from the experience of Black women.

### **Racial and Cultural Stereotyping: Controlling Images, Myths, and Metanarratives**

Gay men are ascribed stereotypes, which are long standing and readily applied in both fun and malice. Regardless of the motivations, the application of stereotypical

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<sup>59</sup> Brett Webb-Mitchell, “Out and Ordained | HuffPost,” accessed September 23, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/brett-webbmitchell/out-and-ordained\\_b\\_1308010.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/brett-webbmitchell/out-and-ordained_b_1308010.html).

imagery is a controlling factor with roots in heterosexism. Gay men are not the only persons subjected to stereotyping. Race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, mental development, economic status, athletic ability, military service, education levels, and religious beliefs comprise a partial list of identities and qualities subject to stereotyping. Historical prejudices and lack of understanding foster ongoing perspectives that create and support narrative backstories attached to anyone vulnerable to discrimination. Congregations hiring a gay pastor are well encouraged to recognize, define, and dispel these controlling images, myths, and metanarratives, so old negative bias is not allowed to damage the new pastor's early days.

As someone called "fatso" and "faggot" at various times of adolescence and young adulthood, the internalized personal experience of controlling images and metanarratives intentionally used for damaging effects allowed me to engage with the controlling images presented by Patricia Hill Collins in her article, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images." Chanequa Walker-Barnes' article, "The Burden of the Strong Black Woman," is another resource addressing the impacts of controlling images. Because I am a white, gay, cisgender male experienced with the detrimental effects of othering, I value this inclusive embrace of womanist socio-theological perspectives. The sociocultural information is included here as a parallel reference to show that othering tactics cross a variety of cultural perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, when tactics such as the ones noted below are added to those ascribed to the LGBTQ community, the range of challenges is increased for the gay pastor in a new setting.

## Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels

Collins sets out the basis of the demeaning labels for African-American women that survived slavery, lived through the Jim Crow era, and marched in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, by saying, “The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination.”<sup>60</sup> These creations live on and the motivations that spawned them mutated to affect other social groups.

The intended outcome, sought by those with enough power to be thought leaders who create and communicate controlling images, is to put people deemed unworthy, unwanted, and unacceptable into subjugation. Mammies, Sapphires (as matriarchs and welfare mothers), and Jezebels are the labels that Collins identifies pertaining to African American women. Since those labels do not sound ugly, hateful, or hurtful to the white, privileged ear, they are used to make “racism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” in America.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Collins says that “African-American women’s status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality.”<sup>62</sup> This infers not only that the labels bestow social assimilation with a preferential identity, it also means that the

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<sup>60</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

labeled people find themselves enclosed within an invisible fence of otherness. The privileged keepers of the labeling machine utilize this power to secure their own advantaged roles, identities, and economies.

In concise definitions, “Mammy (is) the faithful, obedient domestic servant”<sup>63</sup> and “while the mammy typifies the Black mother in White homes, the matriarch (Sapphire) symbolizes the other figure in Black homes.”<sup>64</sup> There is a continuum of experiences because the role of a mother may run from very successful to very disadvantaged, both inside and outside the home. The welfare mother constitutes “...poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law. They are essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery....”<sup>65</sup> On another continuum, the welfare mother could be labeled negatively with either the Sapphire or Jezebel identity. Jezebel “is a Black woman who may be thought of as a whore or simply someone thought to have a propensity for immorality or deviant sexuality.”<sup>66</sup> Note that sexuality is used as a controlling image, which also happens to gay men when discriminated against in professional settings.

These identities are not applied lightly. Collins writes, “Taken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women's sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with intersecting

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 89.

oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States.”<sup>67</sup> That domination remains despite claims that America is post racism due to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and anecdotal indicators are common that the matrix remains alive and effective.

Furthermore, this womanist perspective continues theologically as one recognizes that people are labeling and reacting to certain persons as if they were not created equally or as “very good” as others created and named in the Talmudic creation stories of Genesis 1. Nor does it recognize the inclusive protective covenant that God made with Noah, his descendants, and every living creature in the Great Flood story (cf. Genesis 6-9). Interfaith perspectives may identify the labeling and categorizing with controlling images as a denial of the application of the Golden Rule (cf. Luke 6:31), which has origins in many historical religious heritages—not only in Christian tradition.<sup>68</sup>

To mend this breach in sacred personhood, Walker-Barnes encourages women to embrace themselves as good “finite creatures.” She presents a “new vision for African-American womanhood (that) must inculcate a commitment to self-care and also help women to develop and maintain mutually supportive relationships....”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>68</sup> “The Golden Rule,” *Philosophy Terms*, last modified April 16, 2017, accessed September 24, 2018, <http://philosophyterms.com/the-golden-rule/>.

<sup>69</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, “The Burden of the Strong Black Woman,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 19, no. 1 (2009): 17.

The help Walker-Barnes offers her sisters is spiritual support for all who are put down by dehumanizing labels and slanted socio-political relationships. A new vision of self as wholly qualified and capable will be inspirational to LGBTQ community members as well—including gay pastors—when, as needed, they counteract personal and professional discrimination with actual experience. Anticipating confidently that *gay pastors will be good pastors* is the new vision for the Christian Church.

The Rev. Ron Buford referenced the story of the Rev. Dr. Bill Johnson, as Ron put into perspective his personal understanding of self-identity in the face of inherent social prejudices potentially applied to his pastoral ministry. While answering video interview Question 2, pertaining to the risks and rewards of being the first gay pastor at the Sunnyvale church, Ron spoke about his continuation on the path established by Bill:

One of the things I appreciate in the United Church of Christ tradition is the fact that, not only was William R. Johnson the first openly gay person to be ordained in Christendom, but more importantly to me is the fact that when he was ordained, he was given the choice of being ordained and perhaps requiring him to be celibate. He said, "No, that's not going to work. Ordain me as I am." So, not only did we ordain the first openly gay man, the first openly gay non-celibate man, which not only liberated gay people coming into this role, but also many straight people who were in situations that were non-celibate and just hadn't been talked about. So, I came to the job knowing that we had these issues to deal with, but totally refusing to be put in any kind of box and knowing that for some people that might be a challenge, despite the work we had to do. But I think the more important thing...is to come into the role with integrity of who you are and what it is you have to present and doing that with some confidence....<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Buford, "Video Interview with the Rev. Ron Buford, Congregational Church of Sunnyvale - UCC, Sunnyvale, California."

As a Black gay pastor, Ron has a different portfolio to present to a new congregation than the other 11 white gay pastors presented on [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com). Additional study of Ron's phenomenon is important, though beyond the scope of this D/P. Including his circumstances here provides a glimpse into the wide array of matters that an arriving gay pastor and hiring congregation may discover, confront, embrace, and work through together to produce mutual benefit and faithful ministry.

### **Family Systems Theory**

After arriving for the new job—as initial experiences transition to developing routines—getting to know community and congregation members is how the ministry covenant begins to establish good roots. The resulting growth varies according to the customs and family systems of the local parish. Among the video interviews on [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), Questions 3 and 4 give examples of how these gay pastors felt in their early days and how congregations communicated the new pastors' arrival to the community.

Welcoming a gay pastor with the intention of making the ministry covenant work well is the presumed goal of all parties involved. As the work begins, congregation and pastor alike bring personal histories to the endeavor. The congregation's cumulative experiences and stories include aspirational visions, interpersonal experiences, and skills development. Established family systems come with all people coming to church for worship, education, service, and leadership. In the "Preface 1993" section of his book, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (2006), Peter L. Steinke says, "As long as people gather and interact, emotional processes occur. There are positive aspects of these

processes – joy, comfort, support, cooperation, and friendship. But emotional systems are inherently anxious. The downside, therefore, is the intense anxiety that distracts the congregation from its purpose, sets people at odds with each other, and builds walls against outsiders.”<sup>71</sup>

Research shows that pastors are better prepared to navigate personal and professional relationships in communities they serve when they have a clear understanding of family systems theory. Developing skills in family systems theory relating to clergy leadership will help pastors be healthy. Michael J. Aufderhar’s PhD thesis, “Clergy Family Systems Training and How It Changes Clergy Leadership Attitudes and Practices,” is a unique study measuring the efficacy of family systems training in reducing anxiety among his clergy cohort. Aufderhar reported that only in recent decades has family systems theory emerged, and it took several years before it began to be applied to clergy leadership and relational anxiety in congregations.<sup>72</sup> Beginning with the work of Murray Bowen (1913-1990), who developed this theory through his work at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Aufderhar’s paper presents a chronological array of professionals in what he terms a “Family Systems Theory Family Tree.” In text and chart, he traces the advent of the theory, its rise in

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<sup>71</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Michael J. Aufderhar, “Clergy Family Systems Training and How It Changes Clergy Leadership Attitudes and Practices” (Doctor of Philosophy, Andrews University, School of Education, 2010), 42.

study, and application by many practitioners.<sup>73</sup> Aufderhar's family tree lists three generations of family systems theorists, authors, trainers, and centers. In the second generation, he places Edwin H. Friedman (1932-1996) (*Generation to Generation*, 1985) as the progenitor of connecting family systems in the home with the relationships functioning in a congregational setting. From Friedman's initial work, others have developed strategies and techniques for benefitting clergy dealing with congregation members in the parish setting. When clergy ascertain the source or cause of tension-raising behavior, thereby not assuming fault for a tension filled event, the clergy person can modify their personal reactions to lower anxiety levels.

The reactions congregation members have toward the new pastor will vary according to their expectations and prejudices. Churches welcoming gay pastors for the first time may lose some members because of individual understandings and conclusions about sexual orientation. The initial loss of members and attendees is not the fault of the new pastor. The Rev. Ron Buford, who had the distinction of being the first gay pastor and the first Black pastor hired by a church in Sunnyvale, California, spoke about this in his interview Question #4: "Sometimes we're focused about the people we lose because of our own issues with rejection. I have fears of abandonment and I'm really prone to that kind of thing. It's important that you're not stuck in that reality, but in the reality that we

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 22-43.

are called to lead the people God has called to the ministry we serve. That's okay. Let them go.”<sup>74</sup>

While being Black and being gay are two clear factors in Ron’s scenario, family systems related conditions are not always obvious. The new pastor will need to learn them. The following example presents a story from my history, which demonstrates the need for clergy to know family systems theory and one congregation’s experience with the related circumstances.

Following my 2002 second career shift, returning after 20 years in the Chicago business community to my original calling—ordained ministry—and co-founding a local congregation, professional counseling during an interpersonal crisis situation led me to Roberta M. Gilbert’s book, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference* (2006). This was my first exposure to family systems and learning non-anxious clergy leadership practices for congregational interactions. At the time, that knowledge and practice saved my ministry

Clergy-focused family systems theory enabled me to overcome a very difficult situation that arose between three church leaders. When I returned to pastoral ministry after my 20-year hiatus, I was confident in my entrepreneurial skills and sense of clergy call. What I did not anticipate is how my self-esteem and desire for success would generate fears when interpersonal communications among our small group of developing church leaders occasionally got tense. Looking back, I realized I was unprepared to

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<sup>74</sup> Buford, “Video Interview with the Rev. Ron Buford, Congregational Church of Sunnyvale - UCC, Sunnyvale, California.”

accommodate the inherent presence of my alcoholic family systems, which became activated in some church interactions.

My father was an alcoholic. He was not a drunk all the time, only for two seven-year periods in my parents' 53-year marriage. The first one occurred early, prior to World War Two and before I was born. The second stretch started when I was in fifth grade and lasted until I graduated from high school. During these times, my mother would confront my dad when he came home after too many beers. As a result of her experience, my mother hated the drink – not just with dad, but in general. When dad arrived home late, she was loud with displeasure. Sometimes my fairly docile dad would get loud back. Past hurts were aired repeatedly. Rehashed consequential decisions stirred unhappy memories. Divorce was shouted about but never acted upon. Certain relatives were insulted in absentia, though relations were never broken in person. Open windows on summer days and lights on in the middle of the night alerted neighbors that Beatie and Archie were fighting again.

Living at home at the time, I comforted my mother when she was beside herself in both anger and grief. Sometimes I challenged her to “rise above it.” Looking back, I think comfort by itself would have been a better approach; however, I was an adolescent with an immature frontal cortex. So, I did not know yet how to judge the gray areas of relationships—especially with alcoholism involved.

Inexplicably, after seven years, my dad got sober for a second time. No recovery programs were ever invoked. The drinking just stopped, and he started showing up on time, all the time. While there was evidence of a pattern of two timetables, there was

never a third. The second period of sobriety lasted until his death about two decades later. We never questioned my dad as to why these two eras of family agitation took place.

The residual effect on me has been an innate and forceful desire to settle things down. Essentially, using my family image, I want to keep interpersonal interactions and public encounters quiet so “mom and dad” will not start fighting. This affects my ministry when I am in leadership meetings, whenever congregants express dissatisfaction, when one congregant is hurt or angry about another, and when the tensions of the world are so thick as to be unavoidable.

My aha moment about the value of family systems theory for clergy occurred shortly after co-founding Bloom, when I was almost incapacitated by getting myself mixed into relational issues among three church members. Based on my limited experience with church conflict, and the patterning of my childhood, I thought my pastoral role was to fix tense relationships and conflicts, i.e., quiet them down. Not knowing about family system theory, I was unaware of the factors related to anxious personalities, psychological projection, and communication triangles. I had never heard of being a self-differentiated, non-anxious presence during church community anxiety eruptions. Such are the focal considerations of clergy leadership and family systems theory. All pastors, including gay pastors, who learn and use family systems conditions and techniques will benefit themselves and their congregations.

One of the ways family systems comes into play in churches is when members of the congregation start transferring the experiences of their family onto church leadership, particularly onto clergy. The starkest example of this in my experience occurred when a congregant, who was the current moderator of the congregation, became involved in a

conflict between her and two other leaders. She said to me in a telephone call as I was trying to calm her down, “You’re just like my father trying to get me to communicate nicely with my stepmother.” When I recalled this conversation in professional consultation, it was my pivotal and eye-opening aha moment to the effects of family systems functioning in clergy roles.

As the three-way conflict grew to impact me negatively, I began to consult with a 30-year Episcopal priest in private practice as a counselor and an expert in family systems theory related to clergy leadership. I learned from her that I was getting myself into triangulating expressions of family roles, which were not mine to fix. Gaining this insight and envisioning my role as a self-differentiated, non-anxious presence (Gilbert 2006), enabled me to rise from the emotional mire. My consultant encouraged me to become better skilled at “peeling off” issues and “dialing down” anxieties thrust upon me by parish ministry. Professional consultation lasted more than two years, with monthly sessions the first year, adjusting to bi-monthly later, then occasional tune-ups. My pastor-parish committee created and ensured continuation of the budget line item to pay for the consulting sessions. It was supported as essential to our congregational development. As a result of my personal experience of church conflict and clergy counseling, plus applying lessons from DMin. seminars, I now strongly advocate for making family systems principles known and present in local church leadership training and conducting parish business.

To gain the benefits of the theoretical principles, a pastor works to adjust the role of leadership to be on the edge of the communication circles, not in the middle of them. Being on the edge, the pastor steps back from tense or anxious situations. This

implements the skills of well-differentiated leadership and enables non-anxious responses to anxiety-induced agitation among congregants as the gay new pastor arrives. This agitation may be acute when a church has never employed a gay pastor before. Gilbert describes conditions pastors may find:

What they find is that the emotional side of the congregation, that supportive, loving, and caring side, can also flip, becoming negative, perplexing, and difficult to manage. It can turn against the minister or rabbi, becoming critical or vindictive. It can spare the leader, but stir up the congregation to an extent that nothing useful can get accomplished. It can also obstruct forward progress of any kind. Clergy people are usually completely blindsided by it.<sup>75</sup>

Left untreated, the anxiety may become chronic as it mixes with the societal “gay is against religion” messaging noted earlier. In a video included on the Resources page of [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), Dr. Jonathan Camp presents principles and applications of Edwin Friedman’s book, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (1999, 2007, 2017). Camp explains how anxieties negatively impact organizations including congregations:

Central to Bowen's family systems theory is the concept of differentiation, or the ability of a person to maintain a strong sense of "self" within the family. The anxious family system is composed of emotional triangles, in which two conflicting members try to diffuse the anxiety between them by bringing in a third member. But this only heightens the anxiety of the system. A well-differentiated person is able to resist the lure of emotional triangles, which causes the family system to mature by influencing others to take responsibility for themselves.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Roberta M Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference* (Falls Church: Leading Systems Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>76</sup> Mathew David Bardwell, *Friedman’s Theory of Differentiated Leadership Made Simple by Dr Jonathon Camp*, Video (YouTube, 2010), accessed July 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgdcljNV-Ew>.

In *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (2006), Peter L. Steinke lists 13 triggers of anxiety for congregations. He says, “one alone, if emotionally driven, could create havoc.”<sup>77</sup> Among these triggers, are several that would come into effect upon the arrival of a newly hired gay pastor. Two of the 13 are easily predictable in the situation:

- Sex, Sexuality: As sources of identity and self-expression, questions and differences pertaining to sex set off survival reactions.
- Growth, Survival: Congregations may be anxious because growth is slow or worship attendance declines.

Three others of the 13 are potential influencers, as well:

- Trauma, Transition: A key or nodal event happens with a significant emotional impact, such as storm damage to the church structure or the retirement of a pastor after a long tenure.
- Staff Conflict, Resignation: When the church staff is at odds or a staff member departs under the cloud of suspicion or for unexpected reasons, people become upset.
- Harm Done to a Child, Death of a Child: Congregations are children sensitive. If a child is hurt or if one dies, there is a sense of helplessness: we cannot even protect or defend those in our care.<sup>78</sup>

Steinke and others offer an aspirational role model for organizational leaders to emulate. Skilled gay pastors working in anxious conditions will be most effective helping people when they conduct themselves in a non-anxious manner. Steinke writes: “The nonanxious presence is a description of how a person works to keep the center of control within oneself and as a way to affect relationships in a positive manner. To be a

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<sup>77</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2006), 15.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

nonanxious presence, you focus on your own behavior and its modification rather than being preoccupied with how others function.”<sup>79</sup>

The differentiated leader remains nonanxious by not allowing oneself to be recruited or put in the middle of conflicted interactions. At the most basic level, the nonanxious leader avoids being a third-party in a two-party concern. Family systems theory encourages leaders to avoid triangulating in anxious environments.

For leaders, the capacity to understand and think in terms of emotional triangles can be the key to their stress, their health, their effectiveness, and their relational binds. Almost every issue of leadership and the difficulties that accompany it can be framed in terms of emotional triangles, including motivation, clarity, decision-making, resistance to change, imaginative gridlock, and a failure of nerve.

Emotional triangles thus have both negative and positive effects on leaders. Their negative aspect is that they perpetuate treadmills, reduce clarity, distort perceptions, inhibit decisiveness, and transmit stress. But their positive aspect is that when a leader can begin to think in terms of emotional triangles and map out in his or her mind (or even better, on paper) diagrams of the family or organization, such analysis can help explain alliances and the difficulties being encountered in motivation or learning. This in turn can help the leader get unstuck by changing emotional processes and becoming more objective about what is happening.<sup>80</sup>

For most pastors, this is learned behavior not easy to learn. Gilbert empathizes with leaders in this behavioral quest:

*“It is difficult to maintain a calm emotional state while connected to intensity in others. If the leader can do just that, however, not taking on the anxiety of the group, and thus, not becoming de-selfed, continuing to think and interact in*

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>80</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th anniversary revised edition. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 219–220.

conversation, the group will, in time, with its leader, go on to a better level of functioning. It will find problem-solving easier.”<sup>81</sup>

Gilbert says that extraordinary leaders attain a set of principles that help them find creative solutions to difficult situations. She lists the key abilities that foster these principles as:

- They manage self.
- They connect with others during the process – they are present and accounted for.
- They’re curious, asking thoughtful questions.
- They observe, and
- They define their thinking to the group.<sup>82</sup>

During the first six months of a gay pastor’s arrival on the job, working as a differentiated leader will support healthy and effective ministry. It will help the pastor gain confidence in trusting self for decision making and developing good relationships. The Rev. Greg Davis provides an example in his video interview answer to combined Questions 6 and 7. He was the third called minister and first gay male pastor of a relatively young congregation he no longer serves. Remembering his experience, he noted that soon after his arrival a family left the congregation. While this saddened him personally, and stirred dynamics in the congregation, he did not insert himself nor allow himself to be brought into congregational agitation associated with the departure. He worked to be a differentiated non-anxious presence.

We had people leave the church. We had one young woman who happened to be a seminarian leave and start her own church, which was a difficult thing for me as a

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<sup>81</sup> Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership*, 127.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–130.

pastor and realizing, “What weren't we giving her and her family?” And it was a lesbian family with two children. Where were we missing the boat on that? And realizing that, you know what? We weren't missing the boat. That with every situation, any time there's any community engagement in a church situation, there are going to be people who will buy in 100%. There'll be people who aren't being fulfilled. And there will always be those people who are ready to take you down. (But) I didn't think that that was going to happen.<sup>83</sup>

Greg’s recollection illustrates what Gilbert says: “One of the most important functions of the extraordinary leader is to be perfectly clear about mission, vision, and goals, bringing them to awareness often, especially in planning meetings, sermons, or talks, and in discussion with others, making them live.”<sup>84</sup> The following research may bear this out.

The project portion of Aufderhar’s paper measuring benefits related to family systems training involved in-depth interviews with 14 parish pastors of various church denominations. The interviews were conducted following a multi-session family systems theory training event at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which all interviewees had attended. Participants produced primary resources such as journals and drawings in addition to survey answers, which examined and measured their experiences. All clergy participants showed improvement in their capabilities for healthy ministry.

Aufderhar summarized his findings in the dissertation’s abstract:

The clergy persons in this study experienced eight different positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices through learning and applying Clergy Family Systems Theory. They found the concepts in the training program to be

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<sup>83</sup> Greg Davis, “Video Interview with the Rev. Greg Davis, In Search Process, Referencing Role as Immediate Past Pastor, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, Nevada,” Video, July 30, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

<sup>84</sup> Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership*, 131.

highly relevant to their personal and professional lives and expressed a very high Overall Value of the experience. After the program they found they were more aware of systems issues in real settings and also more aware of their own reactive patterns. These awarenesses contributed to their being Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm, and More Calming (sic).<sup>85</sup>

These are excellent outcomes for parish ministry. They show the benefits of learning and applying the principles and skills associated with clergy family systems theory:

The improvement comes through clergy being willing to take a serious look at their own emotional process, their own families, and their own families of origin. They will find not only habitual patterns of functioning that increase anxiety and decrease healthy function, but they will also find strengths that can be built upon. As they become aware of these patterns and take steps to begin to shift them, this cannot help but improve the “mirroring” health of the congregations that they serve.<sup>86</sup>

In the monthly meetings with my family systems counselor noted previously, I built awareness of my weaknesses and strengths in clergy leadership. Some of them were attributable to the 20-year hiatus in my pastoral career. When I returned to parish ministry, my seminary training was dated, my clergy leadership experience was abridged, and my pastoral skills were rusty.

From the onset of the consulting sessions, I absorbed the family systems information like water into a dry sponge. Since some of my congregational leaders were aware of the consultations, they were ready to hear what I learned and shared, and to

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<sup>85</sup> Aufderhar, “Clergy Family Systems Training and How It Changes Clergy Leadership Attitudes and Practices.”

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

apply the lessons locally. There was an immediate change to the way I approached tension and conflict in the church, i.e. modeling a non-anxious presence. I did not always succeed, but my skills for approaching conflict grew more effective. Likewise, spreading the church-related family systems message among leaders changed the way congregants perceived and dealt with congregational tensions.

This relates to the newly hired gay pastor as it did to me, as family systems-generated emotions and actions will be present in any parish. In his paper's introduction, Aufderhar presents a core factor that gay clergy would do well to remember as they enter a new congregational system. They are entering a collection of family systems and bringing their own along.

Friedman solidly established the reality that congregations are subject to the same family system dynamics that human biological families experience. He showed that clergy persons, knowingly or not, are constantly participating in the system dynamics of these three interlocking families—the congregation as a family, the families of the congregation, and the clergy's own family. His or her own family, of course, is not just the family under his or her roof, but the entire extended family including families of origin.<sup>87</sup>

In this system framework, Steinke defines the role for the new pastor to establish: "The nonanxious presence is a description of how a person works to keep the center of control within oneself and to affect relationships in a positive manner. To be a nonanxious presence, you focus on your own behavior and its modification rather than being preoccupied with how others function."<sup>88</sup> Friedman writes: "Well-defined self in a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>88</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 2006), 31.

leader—what I call self-differentiation—is not only critical to effective leadership, it is precisely the leadership characteristic that is most likely to promote the kind of community that preserves the self of its members.”<sup>89</sup>

Aufderhar’s research among active clergy in the parish bears out the claims of Friedman and Steinke as he concludes:

...There can be significant improvements in your leadership and ability to minister to your congregations. The awarenesses you gain of the congregation as a system will pull back the veil on dynamics that otherwise can be very mystifying and challenging. You will also have greater understanding of families within the congregation and will find yourself knowing better how to guide family members in various struggles they face.<sup>90</sup>

This encouraging finding shows that knowing and being clear about the functioning and effects of family systems in the congregation is an essential best practice for arriving gay clergy to cultivate in order to achieve personal and congregational health. The gay pastor especially needs to know this because family-based homophobia may be creating anxious people in the congregation. This may add cumulative energy to the excitement and apprehensions typically experienced when new pastors arrive. The added detail of the first time with a gay pastor in a congregation is a nuance that requires attention. Changes may need to be made in leaders and programs. The new pastor may need to pay attention to the psychological environment of the congregation. The tension and anxiety in a

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<sup>89</sup> Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 174.

<sup>90</sup> Aufderhar, “Clergy Family Systems Training and How It Changes Clergy Leadership Attitudes and Practices,” 165.

family may be rooted in the theological premises that have been assumed. In addition to the family systems environment, the new gay pastor has these factors to consider and work on with the congregation.

The gay pastor also needs to be aware of the family system he brings with himself. The way he functions in his family will inform the possible ways he will respond to anxious people, tense moments, and internal monologues. Getting a grip on the way the congregation's family system theory functions is the first step in working toward effective ministry—making the covenant work. As the pastor and the congregation seek and maintain clarity on these factors, the potential for success will increase. The plan for “7 Monthly Meetups,” found on [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), presents good opportunities to discuss these factors as they arise. Additionally, it may be beneficial for the pastor to have a local therapist and trusted confidants to process these feelings and events when they happen. Being clear about what causes anxiety in the congregation and the pastor starts an excellent plan for achieving the goals and objectives set by the parish.

### **Adaptive Action**

Since welcoming gay pastors to serve congregations not demographically dependent upon the LGBTQ community is comparatively rare, it is likely the action will involve adaptation and change for the congregation. Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay, in their book *Adaptive Change*, refer to this process as adaptive action, saying: “Adaptive action is an elegant and powerful method for engaging with dynamical change in an ever

emerging, always self-organizing world.”<sup>91</sup> Adaptive action addresses change in congregations in healthy ways. This change will influence attitudes about social order and Biblical principles. This D/P notes how personal influence and attitudes about social order and Biblical principles become agitated as conventional religious thinking intersects with LGBTQs. Parallels may be drawn to the history and effects of other social change movements, e.g., the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights Movement. These social movements became catalysts for adaptive action in their time and continue to be so in various ways. While this project suggests parallels between earlier social change movements and that of gay pastors today, the focus is limited to supporting the covenant of first-time gay pastors arriving to work with established congregations. Finding other socio-historical parallels would be a valuable academic exercise for others in the future.

Writing in *The Journal for Preachers*, in 2012, Presbyterian Brett Webb-Mitchell offered a personal observation from his clerical perspective:

...We are but at the starting line in our pilgrimage toward full and fuller acceptance as LGBTQ people who are called to be preachers, teachers, and leaders, as well as members, in *all* communities of faith. Like all pilgrims before and around us, we need to get on the road and pick up the map that will get us moving on a new walk of faith, following an unknown path accompanied by the Spirit.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Glenda H. Eoyang and Royce J. Holladay, *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization* (Stanford: Stanford Business Books, 2013), 30–33.

<sup>92</sup> Brett Webb-Mitchell, “On Being a Gay Pastor: A Pilgrimage of Inclusion of LGBTQ People,” *Journal for Preachers* 35, no. 4 (2012): 45.

Webb-Mitchell expresses a clear understanding of the conditions then and that remain in effect. As some churches and their people adapt to the changing socio-cultural movements, the guidance of God's Holy Spirit is undoubtedly active in paving the way. At the same time, gay pastors and their congregations will need to become increasingly aware of assorted conditions and challenges inherent and developing along their pathways. Attitudes are strong influential ingredients in the pastor-congregation relational dynamic. Anti-gay-pastor attitudes, which may be latent or obvious, may be approached and changed when understood and addressed. Typically, it takes authentic interactions with LGBTQ community members to motivate anti-gay persons to adapt their views to welcoming stances. That experience will enhance the positive potential of the ministry covenant between the arriving gay pastor and hiring congregation.. Enabling such positive and productive exposure is one of the direct benefits derived from watching the interviews on the website and using the plans for the "7 Monthly Meetups" found there.

In an Alban at Duke University blog post entitled, "Encouraging Attitude Change in the Congregation:" Peter Coutts, wrote "The determining factor in congregational flourishing often comes down to attitudes. Change initiatives can grind to a halt when prevailing attitudes impede movement, frequently leaving demoralized leaders with the belief that attitudes don't change. But attitudes can change...."<sup>93</sup> Coutts said leaders can help evaluate the relative importance and impact of attitudes in their setting. "The most

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<sup>93</sup> Alban, "Alban at Duke Divinity School » Peter Coutts: Encouraging Attitude Change in the Congregation," n.d., accessed October 18, 2018, <https://alban.org/2016/06/22/peter-coutts-encouraging-attitude-change-in-the-congregation-2/>.

effective way to help people change their attitudes is by helping people reflect on and revise the beliefs at the center of an attitude. Consequently, discovering the core beliefs of a congregation's attitudes is the vital first step for leaders to take."<sup>94</sup> Coutts defines an attitude as "made up of three components: a belief, an evaluation, and a strength." The belief is the focus a person is presenting. The person's evaluation of the belief—good or bad, true or false, right or wrong—determines the strength it has in the person's values system. Working with the three components of an attitude is how to change it, if possible. Coutts writes: "Leaders encourage attitude change by helping congregants review and revise any of an attitude's components: the belief, the evaluation or the strength."<sup>95</sup>

*In Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities*, authors Roy Oswald and Barry Johnson present factors continuously functioning in congregations that work in cycles of change and social adjustment. They offer polarity maps that present conditions and pathways to healthy organizational outcomes. These factors are offered here to assist in the gay new pastor's arrival and integration with the congregation. They can help both the pastor and the congregation improve chances of establishing a positive relationship and developing benevolent ministry outcomes. Oswald and Johnson say:

"...Polarities are interdependent pairs of truths that are a natural and integral part of our daily lives. Like all other natural phenomena, they are gifts from God. There is a grace that prevails when we deal with polarities. ...Polarities are unavoidable, unsolvable and indestructible – that is, even if you manage them

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

poorly, you have an ongoing opportunity to learn from mistakes and try to manage them better in the future.”<sup>96</sup>

The eight key priorities for thriving congregations are presented as questions to highlight the positive nature of both poles:

- *Tradition AND Innovation:* How do we stay rooted in our historic faith and heritage AND foster creativity in our life together?
- *Spiritual Health AND Institutional Health:* How do we nurture our mission AND spiritual health and maintain a healthy institution that sustains our corporate life?
- *Management AND Leadership:* How do we create or sustain a well-organized, stable congregation AND create or sustain a congregation that inspires members to embrace change?
- *Strong Clergy Leadership AND Strong Lay Leadership:* How do we support strong leadership by our clergy AND ensure broad, active participation by our laity?
- *Inreach AND Outreach:* How do we respond to members’ needs AND take care of those outside our membership?
- *Nurture AND Transformation:* How do we manifest God’s unconditional love for us AND challenge people to grow spiritually and to serve others with commitment?
- *Making Disciples Easy Process AND Challenging Process:* How do we make it easy for people to become members AND ensure that membership has meaning and depth?
- *Call AND Duty:* How do we help members recognize their particular call from God to serve others AND ensure that the mundane tasks needed to sustain congregational life are accomplished?<sup>97</sup>

When this polarities list was presented during a monthly leadership meeting in 2018, the two-dozen gathered members of the UCC congregation I serve “got it” immediately. They saw the value of thinking in terms of values continuums rather than

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<sup>96</sup> Roy M. Oswald and Barry Allan Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2010), 209.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

restrictive columns as realistically adapting expectations to dynamic resources and times. As a result, pressures on church and community relationships were mitigated with greater grace and mutual understanding.

As Oswald and Johnson explain, the polarities function like breathing cycles for the human body, and the body's activity and rest cycles, i.e., breathing in AND breathing out, acting AND resting. These vital cycles adapt to the needs of the body. Understanding the givenness of polarities and adapting to them in organizational settings is a step to welcoming and fostering differing ministry aspirations, styles, and content. Being intentional about finding and maintaining ways to observe flexible equilibrium in the polarities helps persons focus on various organizational goals through actions that interest them. The embrace of variety means organizational leaders, workers, and communicators are less likely to be subject to unwarranted and uninformed critiques of their values and interests.<sup>98</sup>

When any new pastor arrives, determining the status of the congregation's polarities would provide credible information about how the church does ministry. The knowledge will also produce clues about what may need adaptation for better mission outcomes. When a gay pastor arrives for the first time, the potential for problems to arise associated with homophobia and heterosexism, or other concerning issues, means the stakes are high. Oswald and Johnson say, "It is precisely because the stakes are high that it is important to understand whether the difficulty confronting the congregation is

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 5.

essentially a *polarity to manage* with both/and thinking or a *problem to solve*, a situation in which either/or thinking is most useful.”<sup>99</sup> Managing the polarities will enable the pastor and congregation to grasp how best to begin their ministry together. They will avoid focusing on one pole or another, which is why and how organizations struggle rather than thrive. The vitality of the covenant between a congregation and their arriving gay pastor has a solid chance of success when polarities are well managed.

### **Unveiling They/Everybody**

Understanding and applying good practices of family systems theory and polarities management is usually successful when applied among honest and aware situational relationships. However, when invisible factors affect levels of honesty and awareness in an organization, challenges to healthy systems arise. In churches, when congregants assign credibility and standing to disembodied expressions of “they” and “everybody,” the displaced responsibility for individual actions and statements is consequential. Individuals use bias projected onto others because existing group culture justifies the assignment of responsibility for personal bias on others.<sup>100</sup> So, the bias is hidden because it has no identity. It hides, yet it functions clearly. The resulting hidden bias is powerful when allowed to foment in situations of social change. The bias only stays hidden when it is received without proper identity and applied to a changing

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Eoyang and Holladay, *Adaptive Action*, 207.

context. This happens when power is projected onto anonymous comments as they are conveyed for the purpose of supporting or undermining organizational change.

Times of social change are difficult in communities, including congregations. Divisions that grow from the struggles of change can undermine the potential success of a congregation's ministry. Typically, it is only in reporting-after-the-fact that the struggles of change are observed. There is an exception to that notion, presented in a DMin seminar on adaptive change led by Dr. Mary Hess. One of the teaching resources she offered was an Academy Award-nominated documentary film from 1966, entitled, *A Time for Burning*. The 58-minute, black-and-white film delves into the race relations concerns of Augustana Lutheran Church, Omaha, Nebraska. The film's online links are included in the Resources area of [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

The documentary follows the story of a white pastor of the 1200-member congregation as he tried to get his white church members to participate in an exchange of 10 home visits between his church's families and the families of the Black Lutheran church elsewhere in town. The roving camera allows viewers to watch and listen in on church meetings, youth meetings, and at-home group and interpersonal discussions. Viewers see key events as they unfold, and hear real people's voices as they dialogue, cajole, question, and search for a common ground, which remains out of reach. The film presents vividly the challenges of social change in a reticent community.

There is a good reason this atypical resource is included here in a project about welcoming gay pastors. One aspect of the film that stood out for me, as a gay man, was the ever-presence of the invisible "they" or "everybody." Use of unnamed and therefore irrefutable voices of hidden bias was present in many conversations detailing the dangers

of going forward with change. Repetitive speculation of the invisible damage being done and the unheard protests being registered was a constant drain on all potential progress. By the end of *A Time for Burning*, a vocal group empowered by the hidden bias voices overtakes the good that is trying to blossom. The integrated hospitality exchange meetings do not happen, and the pioneering Pastor Youngdahl leaves Augustana for a different posting.

Though the issue at Augustana Lutheran was race relations, the dynamics and process witnessed in the film transcend the topic. As Augustana members discuss the actions and ramifications of welcoming Blacks in their homes or being welcomed into the home of a Black family, acquiescence emerges as one way to dispel personal anxieties in tense conversations. Members acquiesce to the inferred support of hidden bias expressed by anonymous characters. On-camera public waffling by the film's subjects was attributed to factors beyond control and deeply felt fears about the uncertainty of whether or not, "this will split the church"<sup>101</sup> The same fear of uncertainty and loss is experienced by gay pastors arriving in congregations for the first time.

This mid-last-century film about race relations is a tool fit for use in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The eye-witness account of human feelings and interactions delivered by the film is invaluable. The raw reactions to the pressures and uncertainty of outcomes envisioning in congregational and personal conversations is seldom captured with such

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<sup>101</sup> Bill Jersey and Barbara Connell, *A Time for Burning*, Film, Cinema Verité/Documentary (Lutheran Film Associates; Contemporary Films, 1966), accessed June 14, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/atimeforburning>.

transparency. Making a leap that similar feelings and interactions are present in congregations welcoming a gay pastor for the first time is credible. The invisible they/everybody functions as a triangling entity, which people allow to have power in church dynamics. As noted previously, triangling can be one of the congregational dynamics strong enough to knock organizational polarities out of balance. It is essential for new gay pastors to be aware of the potential for they/everybody-influencers to stir up difficulties and keep situations agitated. It is very important for the new gay pastor to establish a boundary carefully that limits the acceptance of anonymous comments and reduces the anxieties generated by invisible they/everybody entities. This is an action principle best established in mutual trust from the very beginning of the covenant between the congregation and pastor.

### **Container, Difference, Exchange (CDE) Model**

The challenges and rewards of parish workings and relationships are complex and meaningful. Grasping the dynamics and mechanics of associated organizational processes is a major task for church leaders, both lay and clergy. Quick searches find there are myriad consultants, software packages, books, seminars, and congregational development plans available to apply as needed and can be afforded. The CDE model is one such model in adaptive change studies. CDE stands for “container, difference, and exchange.” These are categories that describe the “emergent patterns,” and explain “the dynamics of

self-organizing process,” which are “found in the conditions for self-organizing in a variety of contexts.”<sup>102</sup>

For the purposes of this project, the CDE model may assist clergy and congregants to recognize, categorize, and control the various forces that emerge as they welcome their new gay pastor. Containers such as context, congregations, churches, denominations, society, communities, and various time frames hold the ingredients, aspects, and usability to serve as mission locations. Differences are the innumerable and unpredictable elements inside the containers, which inherently (naturally occurring and affirmed), prescriptively (acquired for individual and common good), and proscriptively (forbidden culturally and officially) affect the actions of the congregation. Exchanges are the personal, social, and official interactions and independent actions that affect gay pastors and the congregations hiring them.

As someone with experience of five congregations as their first gay pastor, the Rev. Bill Ingraham did not use the CDE model language in his video interview answering Question 5, referencing his first six months, yet he describes his actions in that time of arrival orientation and assessment as self-organizing.

In some churches, we have immediately started off to the really big tasks: re visioning our structure, re visioning our ministry, re visioning our worship. At another church, actually the one I serve now, a New England congregation, a 300-year-old New England congregation. When they say, "We've never done it that way before," in New England it means something. This is generations on end. I learned that I wasn't quite here yet. I didn't understand them yet. They're getting to know me, they love me, they're affirming, they're welcoming, they're supporting, they're encouraging, they're glad I'm here, but I needed to get to know them better, and even harder.

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<sup>102</sup> Eoyang and Holladay, *Adaptive Action*, 89.

I'm a Texas boy who really cut his ministerial chops in the Mid-west, went to the Southwest for a while. When I landed in New England, I found the church is really different here. If you go to a different region of the country, you're gonna find the church to be very different and that doesn't have anything you do with your being LGBT. That has to do with you and your experiences before, learning how to be who you are going to become in this new setting, in this new place.<sup>103</sup>

Bill presents an inventory of the CDE model as he describes the container of congregation, history, and culture that holds the differences of language, heritage, values, and experience, which are engaged in the exchange of communication, wisdom, faith, emotion, interpersonal relationships, and congregational actions. Each new pastor and congregation encounter similar sets as they begin ministry together. The CDE model is one tool that may help the covenant do well.

Following his years in parish ministry, as he arrived for his job as an ELCA national executive, The Rev. Kevin Strickland soon realized that he would be adjusting, and others would be adapting to him in his role. This is an example of the exchanges adjusting in a new container as a result of differences arising in conjunction with his arrival.

...I learned quickly that this church is not of one mind. I learned that being a national person you're going to walk into places where you're not always sure who else is going to be in the room. I learned that just because you're hired in this position doesn't mean you automatically get respect. Some of that's because people think you're either too young, too inexperienced, or because they don't like the fact you're gay. Even places where I didn't know if they knew I was gay or not, I get there and there's a little bit of a rub. Even dealing with hard topics and angry people or sometimes people who ask things that have nothing to do with what you're there to talk about. I don't know that I was trained to deal with that. I more so just, like, I've gotten better with it over time. In the first six months I was

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<sup>103</sup> Ingraham, "Video Interview with the Rev. William H. Ingraham, First Church Congregational UCC, Methuen, Massachusetts."

probably way more ... Well, I know I was way more anxious about those experiences than I am now. And I think time has helped with that.<sup>104</sup>

Change is married to time. Making change happen may be a quick work or slow process regardless of model functioning. The hopes and desires motivating change vary like the timetables. Each of the 12 pastors interviewed for this D/P gave witness to how their congregations are contextually differentiated, while the questions' topics recognize commonalities across most of the situations. Such dynamic circumstances stimulate pastors and congregations to adapt the practices and goals they use to benefit their situations.

The church is the people. For that reason, when complaints or compliments are registered about church, the subjects of maintaining status quo or implementing change are not amorphous aspirations. People embody the subjects and the hopes. Which means the techniques used in change process are dependent for their timing and effectiveness upon the people using them. Writing in *Immunity to Change*, Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey offer reassuring insight.

Why does it take time? Because we are in the world of human cultivation, not human engineering. We are not speaking of flipping a light switch. We are speaking of the invert evolution of mental complexity, of the gradual process of mental differentiation and re-integration, of looking at a way of making meaning we used to only look through, of shifting subject to object. We have no problem

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<sup>104</sup> Kevin Strickland, "Video Interview with the Rev. Kevin Strickland, ELCA Assistant to Bishop, Chicago, Illinois," Video, July 31, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

with longer time horizons when you're talking about any other major initiative in your organization; why do you expect overnight success in this one?<sup>105</sup>

Whether desired or unwanted, because people are involved, changes occurring in a gradual, evolutionary way are perhaps frustrating, yet lasting. The spread of welcoming newly hired gay pastors to churches is slow. Perhaps that bodes well for lasting effect. Churches that do so and experience positive leadership will be open to repeating the experience. But the rarity of such situations means fears and blockages remain. The bottleneck on this progress may be caused by a sense of uncertainty, which accompanies most new ventures.

An observation offered occasionally by DMin program director Rev. Dr. Virsten Choy, in class and conversation, was that humans are living in a time of “adaptive change with future uncertain.”<sup>106</sup> With uncertain conditions and feelings widely reported throughout American culture, including congregations, Choy’s observation makes sense. The uncertainty reflects the concept of “dynamical change,” which Eoyang and Holladay present in their book, *Adaptive Change*: “Dynamical change is complex change that results from unknown forces acting unpredictably to bring about surprising outcomes.”<sup>107</sup> While this unpredictable force is ongoing, noting the inevitability of uncertainty is a way

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 105.

<sup>106</sup> Virsten Choy, “Dissertation/Project Orientation Seminar” (Seminar presented at the Doctor of Ministry Program, San Anselmo, California, July 2016).

<sup>107</sup> Eoyang and Holladay, *Adaptive Action*, 62.

to maintain individual and group health. As the new covenant begins, it is good for the pastor and congregation to agree that, while they do not know the future, their trust and confidence in each other will support them through.

The uncertainty of outcomes for efforts made in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century lay in contrast to the socio-cultural sense of certainty in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century times, e.g., work hard and get ahead—colloquially referred to as the Protestant work ethic. With an uncertain future causing social timidity, adaptive action may require more time as change finds its path among unmarked roads. This means, due to the persistence of homophobia and heteronormative assumptions in American culture, getting more congregations to hire gay pastors remains a difficult goal.

During the past two decades, the Gay Rights Movement made significant advances toward equality. As anti-gay social and historical values adapt to the new reality of LGBTQ communities gaining marriage equality, plus other civil rights and equal social opportunities, the presence of uncloseted gay men in society becomes ordinary. That adaptive change is felt in religious societies as well, and a few Christian denominations opened their ranks to gay pastors.

The heteronormative assumption pertaining to pastors continues in force in many religious settings, nonetheless it is in flux. As noted previously, some religious bodies welcome gay pastors, some do not, and it is safe to assume some never will. This is a historical progression in line with women and persons of color having to endure difficult transitions to be welcomed as ordained pastors. Many congregations are demographically dependent on stereotypical straight white male clergy, or white heterosexual clergy couples. Building relationships that cross over cultural boundaries is one of the ways non-

demographically matching clergy change preconceived notions that previously hindered their arrivals and the early months of settling.

Getting to know gay pastors is one of the ways people will adapt and change.

Personal relationships are noted widely as the best way to dispel homophobia that continues to include church practices and hiring decisions. Answering questions 16 and 17 on Homophobia, the Rev. Greg Davis says:

I think it's interesting. The term homophobia has been used so much. Sometimes I wonder if it's the right word, because I don't know, I think it all comes down to fear, but I don't think we can really effectively change people when we say, "You are afraid of me." So maybe there's a different word. When there are people that have the homophobic slant to their way of life or to their responses to me, I just always go back to the idea that there's something in their life that they think is going to keep them from God. I just happen to be the one that's here now. In other churches, it might be a female in the pulpit preaching that gets people's ire up. I think that the more that I, as an out, gay man, can really be very merciful when I'm approached in a negative way... I'm convinced that sometimes we, as progressive Christians, get so wrapped up in our causes that we get so angry. I believe there's a time for it. Anger has got to, it's a response that we have that leads us into work for justice, but I believe that in the stories of Jesus, he always coupled those calls to justice with mercy, and that if we don't start to employ some of that in the way we deal, then we become a bunch of screaming ex-hippies, especially in the UCC on the West Coast.<sup>108</sup>

### **Psychological Change Theories**

For a congregation, change from the three steps of never having had a gay pastor, to having one, to having had one is a process that has psychological as well as ecclesiastical implications. Church communities contain complex webs of relationships.

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<sup>108</sup> Davis, "Video Interview with the Rev. Greg Davis, In Search Process, Referencing Role as Immediate Past Pastor, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, Nevada."

The organizational and personal relationships the church community has with the pastor are key influences in ministry effectiveness. For both pastor and congregation, starting off in a good relational context is important. The gay pastor arrives with a vision for the kind of relational environment he hopes to find and foster, which is important to setting the foundation for covenantal success.

Considering briefly how people change will provide some insight into processes some experience when their new pastor is welcomed—and he is gay. Psychological change theories may help congregants and pastors observe how the new arrival creates a new ethos in the congregation; and a broad familiarity with these various theories and basic methods may help the church members adapt and orient themselves to ensuring the gay pastor’s welcome is meaningful.

There will be many dynamics in action in this new beginning, so drawing from various disciplines to be best prepared is recommended here. Jeffrey A. Kottler (1958- ), has worked 40 years throughout the world encouraging human development among professionals and marginalized groups. Among the myriad insights regarding change he offers in his work, he says, “In so many ways, the change options available to us are programmed from the earliest training we received at home, school, and through media in our culture. Notably, what we tell ourselves is possible depends on what we’ve been told so far. These cultural injunctions can be overcome, of course, but in order to do so you must first become aware of the ways you are limited by them.”<sup>109</sup> In the DMin executive

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<sup>109</sup> Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Change: What Really Leads to Lasting Personal Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 221.

program seminar on how people change, Professor Scott Sullender said there is, “no single model of change for all situations. As a pastor you have to be able to function in several different models, depending upon what the congregation gives you to work with. Sometimes change comes through experience—not talk.”<sup>110</sup>

Community and church-based cultural constraints continue to influence and restrict the ability of people to change. When the pastor is a gay man hired by a church that has not had homosexual clergy leadership before, reactions may rise—both positive and negative. As noted previously, when undercurrents of concern or prejudice are active in a congregation, perhaps becoming a vicious cycle of disturbance, naming, and treating the process that feeds them is the best practice.<sup>111</sup> So, it makes sense to anticipate a range of conditions and reactions that exist and may develop. In some cases, it may be essential for the congregation and pastor to seek understanding of, and to establish a process for, change. The shape and effectiveness of specific plans for change will depend on the demographics, attitudes, experiences, and governance of the church’s denomination, local community, and local congregation.

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<sup>110</sup> R. Scott Sullender, “Seminar: How Do People Change: Dynamics Across the Spectrum of Individuals, Families and Congregations” (Seminar presented at the Doctor of Ministry Seminar, San Anselmo California, June 2017).

<sup>111</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 27.

## **Congregation and Community Conditions**

Answering Questions 19 and 20, the Rev. Kevin Strickland was very clear as he observed the gay pastor welcoming conditions of the ELCA, which is the largest LGBTQ welcoming national denomination included among the 12 gay pastors interviewed for this project. Kevin's perspective at the time of his interview benefitted from his position in the presiding Bishop's office and its church-wide exposure. In his remarks, Kevin offered focused advice to churches, pastors, and individuals, including this call for change:

My advice to this church also is we have a beautiful, fantastic “ingiftedness” of LGBT people who we have not tapped the full potential of. There are people who have gone to their graves who have wanted to be pastors in this church who never got to see that day. When people say, "You're a public leader," well, I'm a public leader only because other people were willing to put their neck on the line so that I could be a public leader. We need to make safer spaces for people in this church to be public leaders and be welcomed as a person and not be unwelcomed as a pastor in this church just because they happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Otherwise, I don't feel like we're really being the church.<sup>112</sup>

Even when the national denomination and the local congregation are welcoming, the local community may affect the situation negatively. While civil rights and social attitudes pertaining to the LGBTQ population have improved in recent decades, pockets of negative bias remain. While answering Question 6 about surprises he encountered in the first six months at his new church, the Rev. Jeremy McElvain noted that some community networks were unenthusiastic toward him.

I think the biggest surprise that I encountered was simply being welcomed into the community here. Not only at First Lutheran, but also in the town because at my previous parish, there was really a sense of you don't talk about anything

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<sup>112</sup> Strickland, “Video Interview with the Rev. Kevin Strickland, ELCA Assistant to Bishop, Chicago, Illinois.”

regarding your sexuality. Keep that at bay. But when I came to Centerville, it was a different dynamic. But on the other hand, the other surprise was there were parishes, there were pastors, who and they still don't, they didn't speak to me and they still don't speak to me. ... To have that dynamic, that the very supportive and the very not supportive, that's been surprising to me.<sup>113</sup>

In other instances, the reaction within the congregation may be mixed. More than one of the interviewees noted that, despite the welcoming stance of their hiring congregation, when the moment arrived for the gay pastor to step into leadership, some congregants decided to leave. Speaking about Questions 7 and 11, dealing with disappointments and negative reactions coming to him in the first six months, the Rev. Peter Johnston explained:

One of the things that I found out when I came to the church, even though I was assured that it was a unanimous vote, is that there is one person who was very active in the church who has not been to the church since my arrival, and it's a strong suspicion that it's because I'm a gay man. And what's disappointing about that is one, I don't feel like he had the opportunity to see me in action and know what he was getting into. But, I'm also aware of the fact that it was his church long before it was mine. And so, I'm disappointed, this, I had nothing to do with this. I can't change any of it. The church called me, but I feel disappointed that he felt he had to leave the church where he had been so active for so long because he couldn't get around this issue. So, that was one disappointment.<sup>114</sup>

While understandably troubling for one's sense of self and spirit, these conditions are not surprising to gay pastors. As noted earlier, there are varieties of cross-cultural hiring situations that churches face given the growing diversity of American culture.

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<sup>113</sup> Jeremy McElvain, "Video Interview with the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, First Lutheran Church (ELCA), Centerville, Iowa," Video, August 10, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

<sup>114</sup> Peter Johnston, "Video Interview with the Rev. Peter Johnston, The First Church of Monson, Congregational UCC, Monson, Massachusetts," Video, August 7, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

Situations in the wider community, like those noted by pastors Kevin, Jeremy, and Peter, may be experienced across the LGBTQ, racial, ethnic, and gender spectrums. All these factors involve understanding the changes and psychological experiences that accompany the new, unfolding reality.

### **Select Theories in Practice**

Adapting to the new reality for a congregation after arriving on scene, the new gay pastor may choose to offer a vision that embraces the change. Using a hypothetical exchange between a church member and an arriving gay or lesbian pastor, the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström imagines the way he hopes an introductory conversation would go.

I think it's so important that you're here with your husband, or with your wife. I think it's important that you're here and I want to support the two of you in any possible way that we can, because I'm now so proud of my church. I'm proud that I can bring my niece here, or my mother here, who has been treated poorly in another situation, church situation. And that applies for single gay folks too. I know it's a little different. Again, we are at a place where I am just proud to be at this church. And let us know how we can be of any help in your settling here, whatsoever.<sup>115</sup>

In this portion of his answer to Question 18, about his hope for the church, Paul presents the new circumstance as a beneficial accomplishment, which contrasts with anticipating negative challenges often assumed in such a situation. Creating a new environment is one way to understand the psychology of change.

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<sup>115</sup> Paul Tellström, "Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström, Irvine United Congregational Church (UCC), Irvine, California," Video, July 18, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

Three of the many theories of psychological change are offered here. First is a brief look at the work of Carl Rogers (1902-1987), focusing on the environmental approach he pioneered. Adapting and applying the Rogerian method means creating the context that allows the gay pastor and congregation to honor their covenant with a shared vision, common mission, and collective values. Thus, they start working toward a good future together. Second is the narrative model, which says we humans change when we change the stories we tell about ourselves, our lives, and our futures. Furthermore, we change when we re-author our primary stories as we embrace future stories. Third, the conflict model is presented noting that the arrival of the new gay pastor is an event with both internal and external forces functioning.<sup>116</sup> These three psychological change theories are included specifically because they associate with two behaviors at the core of being church—that is, the body of Christ in the world—where the essential actions are creating community and telling the story.

As a newly hired gay pastor enters the local church environment, that gay pastor and the congregation begin to envision a mutual understanding of how they want their collaborative future to look and to feel. As part of that envisioning, they should create an inclusive story to tell, as well. This is a good practice channeling the Rogerian model, which includes creating an environment (new reality) wherein the congregation and pastor want to live. David J. Cain, in his book *Person-Centered Psychotherapies*, raised an important Rogerian principle. Emerging from Rogers' studies, Cain found the notion,

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<sup>116</sup> Sullender, "Human Change Theories."

“that individual growth was more likely to occur in a certain kind of interpersonal environment.”<sup>117</sup> One key factor in this process is for the church to create an environment of unconditional regard. The ecclesial ingredients for that happening include:

- Taking love seriously.
- Taking Holy Spirit seriously.
- Taking grace seriously.
- Secular embodiment of Christian training.<sup>118</sup>

It may be impossible to maintain unconditional regard constantly, but the expressed aspiration by pastor and congregation to do so will foster goodwill among them all—building what some call the beloved community. Just as it is necessary to talk to one’s therapist to make progress in this regard, people in churches need to talk with each other and with the divine in these terms. In those conversations, referring to the church as the Body of Christ, encompassing all of them corporately as well as valuing all persons individually, is important to the missional achievement of individual relationships and congregational development.

Cain includes Rogers’ methodology among the person-centered approaches to therapy.

While Rogers and other person-centered therapists were concerned with clients’ achievement of their goals, the emphasis of the therapist is on creating conditions for growth rather than alleviation of symptoms alone. In other words, the emphasis is on the development of the whole person rather than on a specific complaint. For some person-centered therapists, the only goal is

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<sup>117</sup> David J. Cain, *Person-Centered Psychotherapies*, 1st ed., Theories of psychotherapy series (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 9.

<sup>118</sup> Sullender, “Human Change Theories.”

to provide the core conditions while other person-centered therapists believe that the identification of and focus on specific client-generated goals is desirable because it gives the therapy direction and cohesion and assures that the therapist and client are working toward the client's ends.<sup>119</sup>

As someone with congregational development training and experience, I equate the person-centered moniker with congregation-centered practical applications. To paraphrase the above citation with parallelisms, the emphasis is on the whole congregation rather than on a specific person. To put it another way, the emphasis is on the whole congregational mission rather than a specific program or role. In this operational scenario, the arriving gay pastor connects positively with the larger values and energies of the congregation rather than with bursts of anxiety stemming from residual resistance or individual self-importance. As a result, the local congregation enables a healthy environment for the covenant to work. Together the congregation and the gay pastor build beloved community and tell their inclusive faith stories.

Carl Rogers said the healthy environment is a relational environment. In that context people grow because the relationship feels safe to them. There are three conditions Rogers noted as fostering good environmental quality. Adapted for a congregational application, they are:

1. Congruence: Trust supports beliefs. Collaboration is valued. The situation feels real and genuine, even logical, so it prompts growth.
2. Unconditional positive regard: The ethos is accepting and affirming.
3. Empathetic understanding: The mutual mission is an extension of pastor/congregation emotions and energy. There is willingness and ability to understand from another's point of view.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Cain, *Person-Centered Psychotherapies*, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Sullender, "Human Change Theories."

According to Cain, Rogers identified, in his first book *The Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child* (1939), some of the basic elements that would form the foundation of what would later be known as client-centered therapy. These elements consisted of a sympathetic understanding, respect for the individual, and an understanding of the self of the client.<sup>121</sup> This relational trinity of interpersonal approaches enables the congregants to experience the integrity required for pastoral care and leadership. When evident early in the pastoral tenure, and well maintained throughout, members of the congregation and professional colleagues will develop trust (congruency) with the pastor in working toward shared missional goals.

The narrative model for change tells us to create a new story, presumably positive, which includes the participants living into the new reality. Sullender says: “We change when we change the stories we tell about ourselves, life, and future. We change when we re-author our primary stories and embrace future stories.”<sup>122</sup> This works in churches when people and pastor agree on the story. But in a situation that has a new gay pastor coming, the stories may not be congruent. It could be that the actual story is different than the one the pastor was told in the hiring process. It could be that the pastor brings a different experiential story than the congregation is used to telling. In these cases, if the differences are not addressed early in the covenantal relationship, the likelihood of change for the better is diminished.

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<sup>121</sup> Cain, *Person-Centered Psychotherapies*.

<sup>122</sup> Sullender, “Human Change Theories.”

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey wrote *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* after completing many detailed studies of change scenarios in corporations and organizations. Among their book's conclusions, they offer this prescription: "To foster real change and development, both the leader and the organizational culture *must take a developmental stance*, that is, they must send the message that they expect adults can grow."<sup>123</sup> In the various settings—including church congregations—this means creating, confirming, and telling a believable story that will "walk the talk." Setting such expectations sends the required clarifying message.

For example, a condition that may greet arriving pastors is that their operational assumptions associated with previous experience and/or denominational norms do not match the functional realities of the hiring church. This means change may be associated with establishing mutual goals for shifting to better practices, thereby beginning a process to create a new operational story to share and tell. The Rev. Greg Davis talked about his discoveries as he answered Question 5, regarding the first six months of a pastor's tenure:

...For a church in the United Church of Christ, I think the thing that surprised me over the first six months was how they didn't really live into their congregational identity. So much of the time, I felt like they were going, coming to Pastor Greg: "We need an answer on this. Would you decide what we're going to do? How do you want to handle Vacation Bible School? How do you want to handle refreshments after church? How do you want to handle having refreshments and fellowship time during the week?" And so, a lot for me was getting them to realize ... it's like I am here. I am your leader. Yes, we are peers on many levels, but we're a congregational church. So, let's get together and I want to give you the power. I want you to be the ones who lead out. Together, we can figure out what

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<sup>123</sup> Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 308.

that vision is. We can figure out the best ways to do things, but this is the church's church. This is your church.<sup>124</sup>

By having this conversation with his leaders, Greg set in motion the creation of a new way of developing the congregation. The covenant between Greg and the church was enhanced by offering his experience and honest feedback to the present circumstances. A new mutual story of alignment with UCC congregational polity and appropriate local procedures set the church on a fresh path. The congregation began offering a different narrative about their work.

The Rev. Kevin Strickland changed the narrative in his life in order to thrive in his covenant working in the ELCA churchwide organization office, serving in the dual roles of assistant to the bishop and executive for worship. In doing so, he came to hope that such actions would change the anti-gay narratives pertaining to pastors in the church. Speaking to Questions 18 through 20, about advice to pastors and churches, Kevin talks about his realization as a result of personal changes through therapy, aging, and relationships. He demonstrates congruence between his personal and professional lives, and presents a logical progression of self-exploration, which shows his inner work and outer experience searching for a life altering change. By accepting and affirming himself, he hopes to be an example that inspires the same for others in the church. It is clear Kevin understands what others may go through but does not let his empathy excuse further

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<sup>124</sup> Davis, "Video Interview with the Rev. Greg Davis, In Search Process, Referencing Role as Immediate Past Pastor, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, Nevada."

bigotry and discrimination. He takes a stand for the good of the community and the stories told:

Well, I'll say something that might sound flippant, and it's not meant to be flippant, it just mainly is just through years of therapy and -- getting to a point where I think age has also helped, but -- I just don't really care as much anymore. I mean, that's it truly -- you have to, especially in a public position like this, if I cared about every single person who didn't like something I said or did or who I am, oh my goodness, I'd spend my whole day just in a fetal position crying. I'd be an unhealthy wad of a mess. So, part of it is just getting to a point where you just let -- you don't let things bother you as much.

The other part of it is having a self-realization that other people's opinions of you aren't going to change you unless you let them. And you must be okay in your own skin. I spent most of my life not okay in my own skin. And when it does bother me, that's when I have to step back and find somebody who can give me some clarity. And so, I have a husband who does that, but I also, aside from putting that on him, I think therapy is a beautiful thing that all people should go through. But I also think that you got to find a confidant. You got to find an equal partner in the faith or an equal partner in your sexual orientation, gender identity struggles you're going through. You need someone you can call and just say, "Here's the crap I've been dealt with today. What do you suggest I do with it?" I -- luckily I have two or three of those people in my life who, when stuff gets real heavy or the public opinion gets too thick, I just call and say, "Help me through this."

And so that's how I deal with a lot of it. Then, but I mean, truly, again, not to be flippant, a lot of it is, you just can't care so much. Life is just too damn short to give people the time that we give them. Because you're, I learned you can't change someone who is not willing to change. And we can work and work and work on that, but there are sometimes you just got to keep living. You got to keep moving and keep living. Because if you stop moving and you stop living, you stop being yourself and you stop doing, then I think we let the people who hate us win.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Strickland, "Video Interview with the Rev. Kevin Strickland, ELCA Assistant to Bishop, Chicago, Illinois."

Kevin's arrival at a place of self-acceptance and affirmation means he will experience for himself, and influence others around him, that covenants with gay pastors produce good and faithful results. While he is only one person on this journey, his high ecclesiastical position accentuates his presence and extends the reach of his effect.

It is safe to assume, and the stories of the pastors interviewed for this project confirm, that the influences of anti-gay religious media personalities and ordinary church leaders mean there will be pockets of resistance to gay pastors in any congregation and within the surrounding community. Wisdom suggests it is good to operate from a perspective anticipating the possibilities of these and other sources of resistance being present and persistent in many church and community settings.

Consequently, for the covenant to work, there may rise a need to foster some sort of change among people in the congregation. This would be the setting where the conflict model is engaged. In this model, the goal is to resolve differences so change will happen. The change process that is conflict riddled may be triggered from the inside or from the outside. Referring to the video interviews and as noted in various sections of this D/P, several of the pastors described various conflicts they experienced. Some instances came from members in the congregation, and one was described as an external community conflict. None of the cases described were potentially catastrophic. This does not preclude the wide understanding that churches, despite their call to "love one another," are places where conflict can brood and thrive. Finding ways to resolve the issues at the genesis of such conflicts is the role of the pastor and congregation as they work in covenant together. Due to the immeasurable variety of settings and circumstances involving congregations, the notion that change happens in diverse ways is generally

assumed. Often an event of conflict triggers the need for change. By being aware of the existence of these conflicts, the pastor and congregation may be encouraged and flexible as they recognize the events occurring and resolve the conflict associated with them.

Considering theological ramifications, according to Sullender, the range of intensity of God's Biblically expressed motivations for change almost seems schizophrenic. As Sullender explained the conflict model, in the Biblical witness, sometimes God calls people to change by violent means and at other times with whispers. In Sullender's cumulative analysis, recognizing and enacting the conflict model takes an event to crystallize the need for a process to begin.<sup>126</sup> That event will most likely be related to the arrival of a congregation's first gay pastor.

Jesus of Nazareth is not someone people typically claim needs to change. However, in one parabolic example, it may be that the purpose of its inclusion in the gospel story is to demonstrate that even Jesus could change. Seminary professor Luther E. Smith presented in his book on prayer a Biblical encounter of Jesus with a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28) as a demonstration that Jesus was inspired by her challenge to rethink the socio-religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles, and between women and men. In the Jesus encounter event, his realization led to affirmation of a person who regularly experienced rejection. Across the ages, the same realization could validate LGBTQ inclusion.

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<sup>126</sup> Sullender, "Human Change Theories."

Unfortunately, this lesson of ancient days is not yet applied universally in contemporary times. However, Smith offers the following faith-based instruction for opening our religious boundaries beyond traditionally assumed limits: “All of us are indebted to this woman for declaring the need for Jesus’ mission to go beyond the boundaries he understood to be fixed by God. As it was with Jesus, so it is with us. The boundaries we have believed to be God sanctioned are challenged by our life experiences. This challenge must change the way we live and pray.”<sup>127</sup> As an African American male who lived through the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Smith is highly sensitized to the effects of personal rejection based on difference from community standards and assumptions. He witnessed change in church and community firsthand. He offers this experience-based insight regarding psychological change:

...Some people best understand reality through their personal encounter with alien conditions. Imagination is not an effective teacher for them. They must experience for themselves discrimination and ridicule before they can understand and empathize. Knowing the agony of being invisible, ignored, or ostracized sensitizes them to be more receptive when they have the opportunity to extend hospitality to another.<sup>128</sup>

Smith’s observation involves all three change models presented in this D/P section: environment, narrative, and conflict. The benefit for a congregation or gay pastor with plans to embark on a program of change is that, even with the statement’s depiction of difficulty, the hope remains that change is indeed possible.

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<sup>127</sup> Luther E. Smith, Jr., “Praying Beyond the Boundaries of the Heart,” *Weavings* 10, no. 5, September/October (1995): 35.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

## Chapter 3

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theological reflection needs to be included because resistance to hiring and welcoming gay pastors is rooted in personal and institutional theologies church members hold. A few selected scripture passages from Jewish and Christian traditions, accompanied by accusatory God-language disguised as teachings and traditions, are repeatedly employed in denominational debates and personal conversations to support condemnation and rejection of homosexuals as clergy, as well as from lay professional and volunteer positions. The condition is historical and systemic. The same inflammatory theological language is used adamantly in public forums to oppose legislative actions guaranteeing LGBTQ civil rights. Anti-gay God language is pervasive in American society. Reports of theologically based discrimination against the LGBTQ community in social, business, academic, and political settings are far too easy to find.



*Figure 1 sites.psu.edu/mtracey/2015*

“God Hates Fags” is a concise summary of anti-gay theology persistent in fundamentalist and conservative religious circles. The pointed rhetoric was pioneered by Fred Phelps, Sr. (1929-2014), who was the lawyer and preacher known widely as the leader of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. This phrase can be found nationally on placards and regularly heard as insults shouted along annual gay pride parade routes and outside LGBTQ-welcoming houses of worship. When the notoriety of showing up at LGBTQ events dimmed, the Westboro group began picketing the funerals

of veterans and first responders. While the harsh sentiment is propagated most widely by the small band of church members, it was adopted by others. Promulgated as a go-to meme expressed in a wide variety of public and private settings, this thematic tone magnifies the core beliefs of anti-gay bullies and preachers both in the United States and globally.

Not every anti-gay-pastor's expression is so coarse. The previously documented, generally prevalent, "gays versus religion" media-based message framing is usually accomplished with more professionally sounding phraseology. Quick web searches produce a large collection of television talking heads, YouTube preachers, and hate-group fundraising letters skillfully perpetuating such negative themes and memes. The purveyors of this discourse use particularly focused positions from both theology and science. Myriad detractors say being gay is against God's law and creation. Even when local churches offer an inclusive and compassionate theology, which welcomes a gay pastor to a new job, anti-gay theology permeating the surrounding communities presents a hurdle for church and pastor to overcome in the welcome and getting-settled process.

### **Bible-based Opposition**

Preparing clergy colleagues to counteract the rise of positive and welcoming sentiments toward homosexuals in the Christian church, Daryl A. Neipp wrote a Doctor of Ministry dissertation entitled, *When Homosexuality Comes to Church*. His stated purpose was to equip General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) with tools of Bible and theology to support negative perspectives on homosexuality. Yet, he offered his

research to all.<sup>129</sup> Neipp's presentation of Biblical and ecclesiastical arguments is a thorough overview performed from the perspective of a selective Biblical literalism, Christian conservative fundamentalism, and a confused evangelical theology. Instead of repeating here the broadly held positions and arguments offered from the conservative religious churches and organizations, interested readers are encouraged to consult Neipp's academic work (or numerous other works that may be found published by others). While Neipp presented his research as a cogent compendium of pro and con points of welcoming LGBTQ persons in church, his clear and narrow aim was to devalue and disprove the pro-gay theological positions of welcoming churches and scholars. I do not support his purpose or position. However, it was enlightening to see in DMin thesis form the wide range of anti-gay arguments and scholarship.

### **Bible-based Support**

On the positive side of the spectrum is Matthew Vines (1990- ). He is founder and executive director of The Reformation Project, a non-profit organization launched in 2013, dedicated to training LGBTQ Christians and allies to reform church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity. In the past decade, Vines gained much attention and praise for his efforts to do the opposite of Neipp's work.

In 2012, at his home church, Vines presented a speech titled, "The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality," which was recorded and popularized via YouTube and

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<sup>129</sup> Daryl A. Neipp, "When Homosexuality Comes to Church" (Doctor of Ministry Project, Temple Baptist Seminary, 2013), 5.

social media. The work was later published as a book, *God and the Gay Christian* (2014), in which Vine presented his range of arguments developed to turn anti-gay perspectives positive. Like Neipp, and as with the dozens of books published on the topic, Vines examined the few scripture verses that have come to be known as the “clobber passages.”<sup>130</sup> Vines presented historical findings in addition to his theological reflections. He concluded these verses do not credibly support anti-gay religious discrimination. In the original speech, after lengthy examination of the Biblical passages and social arguments, Vines made this point:

It’s still commonplace for straight Christians to say, “Yes, I believe that homosexuality is a sin, but don’t blame me – I’m just reading the Bible. That’s just what it says.” Well, first of all, no, you are not just reading the Bible. You are taking a few verses out of context and extracting from them an absolute condemnation that was never intended. But you are also striking to the very core of another human being and gutting them of their sense of dignity and of self-worth. You are reinforcing the message that gay people have heard for centuries: You will always be alone. You come from a family, but you’ll never form one of your own. You are uniquely unworthy of loving and being loved by another person, and all because you’re different, because you’re gay. Being different is no crime. Being gay is not a sin. And for a gay person to desire and pursue love and marriage and family is no more selfish or sinful than when a straight person desires and pursues the very same things.<sup>131</sup>

#### **This Gay Pastor’s Perspective**

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<sup>130</sup> Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, “A Very Brief Glance at Passages That May Discuss Homosexuality,” Religious Studies, *Religious Tolerance*, accessed July 5, 2019, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/homglance.htm>.

<sup>131</sup> Matthew Vines, *The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality*, Video (Wichita, Kansas: College Hill United Methodist Church, 2012), accessed August 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezQjNJUSraY>.

In my life journey—according to my own set conditions—I decided I had to trust first that I was safe in my faith and theology before “coming out of the closet” as a self-affirming gay man. My sense of professional calling to ordained ministry was strong and deeply felt as it coalesced in college. Looking back on my sense of self, I honestly identified as straight—because my enculturation told me that is what a guy does—until coming out at age 27. For me, the recognition moment and subsequent early experiences were like arriving home among friends after a very long journey. I named the acceptance of my homosexual nature “making friends with myself.” Until then, I was in the closet with only a little light shining through a crack in the door. I had same-sex attraction feelings but suppressed them because I thought they were not permitted in my family or my calling. In 1981, I was beginning to consider how my calling was in alignment with my personal identity.

My theological identity as a coming-of-age youth in northwestern Wisconsin was inherited northern Methodism. My theology was nurtured in Sunday school, confirmation classes, and youth groups. My pastors taught social responsibility and personal piety. They presented the Bible through historical critical and contextual lenses. Thinking back, I appreciate that I was not afraid of their suggestions that Biblical literalism was flawed. Then, in my late adolescent undergraduate years, with the encouragement of a personally charismatic and talented Wheaton College graduate hired to be our church’s Christian education director, I became more evangelical in my faith understandings and regard for Biblical precepts. Regardless, I never fully embraced a transactional Christian perspective that placed high importance on personal conversion and Biblical fundamentalism. The way I grew to value theology was measured, tested, and validated in relational terms.

One key factor remained: I did not want to be gay if it was, as I understood at the time, “against the Bible.” Knowing what I know decades later as a result of relationships and anecdotal findings, such a simplistic equation as mine was not uncommon. Growing up as a Baby Boomer in religious circumstances meant that, when same-sex attraction was felt or discussed, it was confronted with socio-religious prohibitions based on pseudo-Biblical assumptions. These prohibitions were augmented by underlying family pressures to align personal development with heterosexual norms. In my experience, the social mores demeaning homosexuals were more common than the social mores respecting them.

The presence of theologically based objections to homosexuality continues to be a catalyst for angst and pain among LGBTQ children and youth as they come to terms with their sexuality in social situations. This is a recognized problem in American society. Organizations to address this issue have become more visible during recent decades. The Trevor Project is one example of an organization serving a mission to save young lives by preventing suicides among teenagers in the coming out process. The influence of religious upbringings is noted by the organization as a topic at the core of youth coping difficulties.<sup>132</sup>

As a young 1979 UMC seminary graduate serving as an associate pastor in a large downtown church in Wisconsin, my confusing thoughts about being gay with Biblical,

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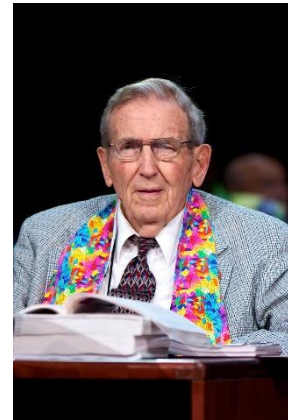
<sup>132</sup> Trevor Support Center, “LGBTQ + Religion,” Organization, *The Trevor Project*, last modified September 2, 2017, accessed July 5, 2019, [https://www.thetrevorproject.org/trvr\\_support\\_center/lgbtq-religion/](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/trvr_support_center/lgbtq-religion/).

personal, and social validity were clarified and nurtured by the publication of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980). The author's broad study and academic conclusions helped me become grounded in my true personal identity as a gay man. Additional study led me to find personal strength by reading *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (1978) by James B. Nelson. The published personal testimony of New York psychotherapist Ralph Blair helped as well. In 1975, Blair founded Evangelicals Concerned ([www.ecinc.org](http://www.ecinc.org)) as a support network of LGBTQ evangelical Christians and friends. These resources and dozens of others consulted in the following decades led me to conclude personally and professionally that the Bible is not against me. Plus, God does not hate me as a gay man nor any other person in and associated with the LGBTQ community. This mental and spiritual confidence is crucial to the solid self-identity of gay pastors who respond to ministerial calling as a profession.

## Church Leaders Evolve from Anti-Gay Positions

There are many church leaders of significance who have found the Biblical and spiritual credence to settle into a welcoming attitude. Two are noted here. Widely respected UMC legal authority and bishop, the Rev. Jack Tuell (1923-2004), spoke at a local church anniversary luncheon in 2003, about “How I Changed My Mind” from rejecting homosexuals in the church to welcoming them into the church. At the close of his speech, he said:

So, what are we to do if we are to change the mind of the UMC to make it more inclusive to all of God’s children? We change its heart. We help all of our people to experience the hurt, the pain, the trauma, the rejection which our present policy inflicts on good and faithful Christians. Oh, we don’t neglect dealing with scripture and tradition and reason, because all of these can be enlisted in the struggle for inclusiveness. But we understand on an issue such as this that changing the heart is a prerequisite to changing the mind. At least, that’s how it was for me.<sup>133</sup>



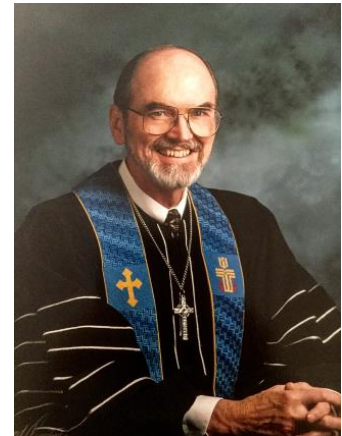
*Bishop Jack M. Tuell*  
*Source: Reconciling Ministries Network*

In effect, Bishop Tuell repented toward the end of his career and life. To what effect his change makes in the ongoing life of the church remains unclear. As of this writing, the UMC General Conference continues to wrangle over its existing set of rigorous world-wide rules prohibiting homosexuals from credentials empowering ordained ministry or getting married within the denomination. While Tuell himself has changed his mind, the global UMC has not yet done so.

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<sup>133</sup> Tuell, “Bishop Tuell: How I Changed My Mind (2003).”

A few years later, the Rev. Dr. Jack Rogers (1934-2016) visited a Presbyterian mission start-up group meeting in the Palm Springs area. My domestic partner (now husband) and I attended the afternoon presentation during which Rogers discussed his book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (2006). In the book, Rogers made a Biblical case for LGBTQ equality. Rogers was professor of theology emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS). He served as Moderator of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA). He earlier taught for 17 years at Fuller Theological Seminary. His credentials for religious study and experience were strong. Gay pastors and hiring congregations may employ to their benefit a foundational statement Rogers made:



*Rev. Dr. Jack Rogers  
Source: San Francisco  
Theological Seminary*

I had often said that I could not change my position on homosexuality unless I was convinced by Scripture. By studying the Bible in its historical and cultural context and through the lens of Jesus' redeeming life and ministry, I have now been convinced that Scripture does not condemn, as such, the sexual expression of contemporary Christian people who are LGBT.<sup>134</sup>

Eventually, the PC(USA) repented and welcomed gay clergy and, by ratification in 2015, allowed same-sex marriages to be performed and blessed in their churches.

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<sup>134</sup> Jack Rogers, "What Could Bring a Person to Change His or Her Mind about Sexuality and Ordination? What Happened in Your Case?," Church Organization, *Covenant Network of Presbyterians*, November 25, 2009, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://covnetpres.org/2009/11/what-could-bring-a-person-to-change-his-or-her-mind-about-sexuality-and-ordination-what-happened-in-your-case/>.

Despite twenty-first century gains in civil rights for homosexuals, particularly marriage equality in a growing number of countries, the old theological factors still fester as anti-gay discrimination in church and society. To put it in parabolic teaching terms, effects of a few Bible verses are “legion.” (Mark 5:9, Luke 8:30) In addition to repeating the work of others to counter the effects of those “clobber passages” (Matthew Vines, John Boswell, James B. Nelson, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, et. al.), there are other theological perspectives that may offer new and helpful insights for starting the job with a new congregation as the first-time gay pastor.

### **Varied Theologies in Local Church Ministry**

The wide variety of theologies may come as a surprise to many people. Contrast the plethora of world religious experience with the restricted conventional sectarian perceptions found in American mainstream media and you find a socio-religious context that includes local churches. This is what the new pastor enters, discovers, and engages: the many varieties of theology functioning in American society. In order to make professional progress in a new job, it is a good practice to sort out what theologies are active in a congregation. Likewise, it is good practice for the gay pastor to know what theologies are in his personal realm. One’s personal theology may not be the same as the prevailing perspective in the congregation. However, it may be that one taps into an unconventional theology in order to cope with the congregational life of a current setting. This theological perspective may be added to the conditions in congregations facing adaptive change and psychological challenges. Deepening one’s theological

understanding of self and of the congregation is useful in getting a new pastorate off to a strong start.

As a new gay pastor settles in a location, he interacts by preaching and teaching within the theological perspectives of the congregation. The local way of thinking and praying may or may not be in alignment with his ways. Each new gay pastor, in his location, will need to ascertain the local theologies for himself. That is one important way to establish credible connections.

However, the new pastor may encounter push-back from outside the local church. Learning the best way to communicate theologically in the congregation may not fit well in the general community. Lutheran pastor the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, in his video interview answering Question 6, noted that he was pleased with how welcoming and receptive to ideas his new congregation was. On the other hand, he was bothered by the reaction of some clergy colleagues in the community.

... There were parishes, there were pastors, who and they still don't, they didn't speak to me and they still don't speak to me. There have been some very hurtful comments made about me and my parish by other pastors more in the evangelical tradition, the Baptist tradition that somehow, we are evil or we're somehow going on ... I'm leading people to the path of Satan or something like that. That kind of hurtful thing, that was really surprising to me. I didn't realize how hurtful other Christians could be and they do it out of a sense of obligation that somehow they're protecting Christianity.<sup>135</sup>

This observation is not meant to alarm the arriving pastor about local clergy antagonisms or inhibit him from making community connections. Rather, the gay pastor who is new in

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<sup>135</sup> McElvain, "Video Interview with the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, First Lutheran Church (ELCA), Centerville, Iowa."

town will do well to assess the theological landscape upon arrival and then become prepared to navigate it. Likewise, he can take heart from Jeremy's report that the congregation was eager to engage with him in the ministerial identity and the message he was bringing. The simple lesson is that aligning with the theology and values of the local church is essential to making the clergy-congregation covenant work.

### **Clergy Theological Journey**

Clergy are on theological journeys as they travel their careers. While they may maintain core beliefs, the expression of those beliefs hopefully will adjust with experience and wisdom. The following paragraphs briefly present a few theologies from the 1970s and more recently, that align with an understanding of God as Love and consequently can be helpful to the gay pastor and his new congregation. This juxtaposition of theologies is not a prescription for anyone else to follow. Rather, it is an example for gay pastors and congregations to use as a springboard for determining their own journeys. This particular theological perspective is based on developing relationships of mutual respect and granted integrity.

Philosopher Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1958) offers a deep wisdom found in the relationship with God and a context for companionship with God. I-Thou is a qualitative relationship that embraces human and divine interaction with supreme integrity and care. The sense of relationship between a congregation and new pastor is I-It when entities are not yet understood but in appropriate relationship. As relational covenant is formed and nurtured, an I-You model forms as the parties gain understanding of each other. According to Buber, this relationship develops through encounter. Fostering the move

from experience to encounter and from quantitative to qualitative relations is a model for churches and gay pastors to use. The essential and ultimate qualitative element of the I-Thou relationship is devotion.<sup>136</sup>

In the ongoing ministry of a congregation hiring a gay pastor for the first time, the theological connection the new pastor brings is pivotal. The hiring is the beginning of a new theological context for the church. The standard, much repeated formulae of opposition to gay pastors will not stand up to scrutiny when the ministerial covenant is strongly embraced. Identifying and communicating the integrity, intellect, wit, accomplishments, and other qualities of the new pastor are essential. As the congregation values them more than the usual ingredients of anti-gay religious discrimination, the congregation will empower the initial covenant to strengthen through time. Answering Question 8 about calling and identity, the Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft implied the value of the relationship-based covenant between himself and his congregation when he said, "...You have a core value, you have your core identity, and there are people around who will walk with you because they see the same."<sup>137</sup> Speaking about negative reactions that may come from the community because he is gay, the Rev. Ron Buford included a statement of theological conviction in his answer to combined Questions 11 and 12, "...I'm really

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<sup>136</sup> Martin Buber and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *I and Thou: Martin Buber; A New Translation with a Prologue "I and You" and Notes* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

<sup>137</sup> Armand Kreft, "Video Interview with the Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft, Retired Priest, Referencing Last Parish, St. David's Episcopal Church, Cape Cod, Massachusetts," Video, July 28, 2018, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

clear about the fact that I'm gay. I have an experience with God and it's real for me and there are other people here like me who share that. And this is a place where everybody's welcome. No matter where they are, no matter who you are or where you are in life's journey.

“True community” can be an aspiration for church. Buber uses the “true community” as the gathering of people in reciprocal relationships. This is a model that a congregation may use to establish the context of the covenant for the ministry. About the relationship between the church congregation, including the pastor, and the divine, Buber writes:

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. The second event has its source in the first but is not immediately given with it. A living reciprocal relationship includes feelings but is not derived from them. A community is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, but the builder is the living, active center.<sup>138</sup>

In order to get to the point of reciprocal relationship, the congregants and their gay pastor will do well to aspire to, and work toward, I-Thou relationships with each other. The mutual relationship with God and community will rightly follow.

More recently, Womanist Theology provides theological perspectives from others who have been “othered” in social history. In a 2015 summer session on Womanist Theology, I was the only male among the eight participants, and it proved a practical learning experience. My testosterone was at first an awkward presence in the classroom.

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<sup>138</sup> Buber and Kaufmann, *I and Thou*, 94.

It took two or three days for the group and me to connect and warm to each other. I learned to suppress some of my nervous attempts at humor, and the other students learned I was not a threat.

This exchange was a valuable reminder of the inherent challenges facing relational, interpersonal communications—even when stated aspirations are aimed toward mutual good. By the end of the seminar, group interactions seemed uninhibited and safe. However, the thought stayed with me that our differences in gender diminished to some degree our ability to be engaged in a Buber-inspired fully reciprocal relationship. When someone feels separate from the group, or a group feels someone is not “one of them,” the work for mutual trust is inhibited. This can be the case in the early days of relationship building and communications for the new gay pastor and his congregation. The Rev. Greg Davis considered this as he answered video interview Questions 14 and 15. Greg said, “...Being male I think can be interesting. In a progressive church too, not wanting to say something that is perceived as antifeminist or patriarchal in any way. It's been a journey for me in my own divine vocabulary. How do I relate to God? I personally related to God as father. I really had to come to grips with that with my female members.”<sup>139</sup>

### **Womanist Theology—The Crossroads and “*Regardless*”**

The metaphor of the “theology of the crossroads,” which the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas offers in her book, *Black Bodies and the Black Church; A Blues Slant*

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<sup>139</sup> Davis, “Video Interview with the Rev. Greg Davis, In Search Process, Referencing Role as Immediate Past Pastor, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, Nevada.”

(2012), is further motivation to envision a relationship-based sense of God. According to the image, the theological crossroads is a three-dimensional space, which a god inhabits and humans visit. Here is Douglas' description of the African myth, which presents the metaphor's basis:

In West African belief systems, the crossroads is where two worlds meet, the world of the gods and the world of humans. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads. As guardian Esu is a divine communicator. Esu relays messages from one god to another god, and between the gods and humans. But Esu does not always relay the messages in a straightforward manner. Rather, Esu takes liberties and plays tricks, forcing the recipients to figure it out and to read between the lines, in many respects crossing the boundaries between a truth and a lie to get the message across.<sup>140</sup>

This description shows characteristics of the crossroads and initiates expectations for visiting there. Douglas further writes: "Essentially, Esu helps people to reclaim the paradoxes inherent in all existence. In doing so, one recognizes that, if navigated properly, these paradoxes are places of union and not discord, they are sources of strength, not weakness."<sup>141</sup> This is the place where people wrestle with the divine and are changed. A theology of crossroads adds dimension to an interactive (reciprocal per Buber) relationship with divine presence.

Taking into account the anti-gay positions many people carry into their church experiences, it is hopeful to envision traditional anti-gay embedded opinions meeting welcoming, inclusive aspirations at the community crossroads where the local church

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<sup>140</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Bodies and the Black Church; A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012), 121.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

sits. In that unique catalyst, when running well, human spirit-minds are transformed for the good purposes of God's mission among humans, and for the created universal realm.

As history unfolded, the crossroads metaphor transitioned from African to American continental folklore, which included some culturally influenced shifts in geography and characters. For one, there was a change from the original description as a fork in the path in Africa to a crossroads in America. And there was a change from a god appearing to the seeker in Africa to the devil coming in America.<sup>142</sup> The road change appears as an experiential progression of myth from a time of paths to a time of pavement, which is an understandable reflection of the progress of American road construction between the eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Something more deeply indicative is the change from Esu being a god in Africa to appearing as the devil (or a big Black man) in America. This is a relational, emotional, and psychological manifestation. It reveals how the nature of the spirit world took on meaning based on the brutal treatment African Americans suffered as victims and descendants of slavocracy.

Additionally, The Crossroads is a multi-dimensional place. It is not binary, bidirectional, or birelational. By multiplying the spatial directions and number of planes that one may use to approach and observe a crossroads, one may see more possibilities and greater depth in the connection that happens as one arrives to commune with the god (or the devil) who shows up. The Crossroads bring another beginning to the kinds of relationships humans may encounter and develop in their walk of faith. Womanist

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 120.

inclusiveness means that it is not important or necessary to think that the roads that meet for crossing are linear or flat. The summary portrayal Douglas gives opens the boundaries while defining spatial relations:

“A crossroads theology recognizes the crossroads as a space of infinite possibility. Such a theology views the crossroads not as a liminal space, that is, as an in-between and undefined space of various realms of reality and identity. Rather, it sees the crossroads as a stable and definite space that reflects the fullness of divine and human existence. A crossroads theology thus considers boundary lines of different realms, such as the human and divine, or spheres of identity, such as Blackness and femaleness, as lines of possibility. Where all these lines enter into one space is a crossroads location, be it a social or existential space.”<sup>143</sup>

Removing ordinary constraints may allow believers the imagination to think big and more broadly about their potential after a visit to The Crossroads. Also, there is something engaging and wonderful in reading and accepting that “a crossroads God is one that is wild, wicked, and sensuous. This god names, disrupts, and plays with multiple realities of oppression.”<sup>144</sup> I am a gay man who lived through nothing like the slavocracy and was only brushed by the Civil Rights Movement as a youngster. However, I lived my own experience of personal and professional discrimination and suffered with others through the AIDS holocaust. I am enlightened by believing that the Christian God of my heritage is one and the same with the crossroads God of African American heritage.

Douglas also references the ultimate event of the Christian faith story, which is the resurrection of Jesus Christ as told in some of the Gospels. She writes:

A resurrection faith, then, is a faith in a sensuous god. Just as the revelation of God in Jesus is an embodied reality, so too is the resurrection hope of God.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 160.

The resurrection reinforces what the incarnation reveals, that the body is important to God. The God revealed in Jesus values the human body. The body is the vessel through which god chooses to be present in human history. It is through regard for the body that god's freeing, caring and loving reality is made real. The resurrection thus becomes the last word when it comes to god. To know the God revealed through the ministry and resurrection of Jesus is to know a sensuous god. The crossroads god is a sensuous god.<sup>145</sup> (Capitalization is from Douglas.)

For African American women and men who gave their bodies in slave labor for owners, and later earned subpar wages working for post-Civil War mistresses and managers who continued to devalue them, the resurrection does not need to be a far-off event.<sup>146</sup> The indication that the sensuous God values their bodies means they can redeem the promise of resurrection daily by embracing their own sense of body, mind, and soul. They are standing in very good personhood—alive and eternal—despite what powerful people say and do to them. They are valuable to God and that is the resurrecting power in a “death-dealing culture.”<sup>147</sup> Careful of cultural appropriation, LGBTQs can act similarly when tossed aside as worthless in places where rights are not shared equally. It is this embodied resurrection that preaches to all oppressed and displaced people next Easter, and in all Easters to come.

Womanist theology offers a grace-filled sense of relational createdness that opens a wide welcome to all who embrace everyone. Alice Walker (1944- ), credited with naming this theology “womanist,” defines the term first in the earliest pages of her

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 159–160.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>147</sup> Walker-Barnes, “The Burden of the Strong Black Woman,” 16.

collection of writings entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). As part of her description, Walker lists the following characteristics of a womanist: “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.”<sup>148</sup>

The word *regardless* acts as an umbrella covering the meaning of a womanist approach to living interaction and personal acceptance of one’s characteristics. This functions as a form of welcome to the womanist movement for all who will connect. The welcome is based on a single word: *Regardless*; and means a benevolent thoughtfulness, which grew from the expression of one group’s existential survival of brutality into an academic and cultural theological discipline continued by Black women in response to sexism in the Black church and the racism in feminism. There is a shared commitment in Womanist theology to wholeness that serves as an example for ministry. Walker also included Spirit in her definition with a light touch, a loving touch. Therefore, the spiritual welcome of the Womanist movement is to be trusted for gay pastors and the congregations hiring them. *Regardless*.

### **Brueggemann and the Canary in a Coal Mine**

In addition to the simultaneous welcoming and challenging perspectives of Womanist thinking, there are some conventional modern theologians who offer insights that may be used in the LGBTQ community to connect in God’s loving realm. Among them, UCC minister, the Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann (1933- ) is a widely quoted

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<sup>148</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, A Harvest book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), xi.

Protestant academic theologian. With his dozens of books and articles published, he brings more than 50 years of study to his Biblical commentary on the testaments of Christian scriptures. He has written and spoken extensively on how he thinks the scriptures apply to life both for individuals and in the church. As a foundation for credible approaches to Bible study, and its applied effect for social justice and Godly devotion in the lives of clergy and church members, this statement of focus is useful:

It is important that we recognize with some precision the quality and intention of Mosaic, Yahwistic justice, for it is easily misunderstood, given the easy and careless use of the term *justice*. The intention of Mosaic justice is to redistribute social goods and social power; thus it is distributive justice. This justice recognizes that social goods and social power are unequally and destructively distributed in Israel's world (and derivatively in any social context), and that the well-being of the community requires that social goods and power to some extent be given up by those who have too much, for the sake of those who have not enough.<sup>149</sup>

Brueggemann is on record relating the justice tradition and the holiness traditions of the Hebrew scriptures to the struggle of homosexuals to gain ordination and marriage equality in the church. Brueggemann, in an interview published by Julie A. Wortman, said, "I think that it is clear that much or all of the Bible is time-bound and much of the Bible is filtered through a rather heavy-duty patriarchal ideology."<sup>150</sup> As a result of his

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<sup>149</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 736–737.

<sup>150</sup> Julie A. Wortman, "The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical Theology and the Debate About Rites of Blessing: An Interview with Walter Brueggemann," *The Other Journal (The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology)* 4, no. Politics 2004 Issue, Perspective (October 10, 2004), accessed June 17, 2018,

positions, he is sought out and quoted for his thoughts on historical and social concerns pertaining to the church and the LGBTQ communities. In the days of lesbian and gay marriage equality debates in churches, he was consulted on the subject by many interviewers. Subsequently, numerous persons reference this 2004 interview exchange to say he compares LGBTQs to the proverbial “canaries in the coal mine” as an adage pertaining to the spiritual circumstance of LGBTQs in the church in this debate.

Julie Wortman: There are people who say the situation of LGBT people is analogous to that of the canary in a coal mine.

Walter Brueggemann: I’ve said that in the city, homeless people are the canaries, but I think that’s right about LGBT people. A general principle is that whoever is the most vulnerable is the canary. That is, it is always the test case about whether we are following Jesus. And then if you extrapolate to say that gays and lesbians are the most vulnerable in this issue, then they are indeed the canary.<sup>151</sup>

Welcoming the gay pastor to serve churches that are demographically mainstream will be an indicator that more canaries will survive and thrive. Not only is this image applicable to clergy, but also to the health and good ministries of the local congregations they serve. Reflecting on this inclusive theology also seems to foreshadow a new reality that the communities surrounding the churches will experience the benefit of the loving relationships the congregation embodies. The Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström talked about this benefit as he answered Question 20 giving his advice to a church hiring a gay pastor for the first time: “...What you have become is a church that you can bring your favorite

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<https://theotherjournal.com/2004/10/10/the-gospel-vs-scripture-biblical-theology-and-the-debate-about-rites-of-blessing-an-interview-with-walter-brueggemann/>.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

relative, or your son, or your whoever, and that person is going to be so proud of you for being a part of that church that it will astound you.”<sup>152</sup>

### **Polities**

In 1982, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. published their executive leadership best-seller, *In Search of Excellence*, which promptly became must-reading for aspiring businesspersons. Their presentation of corporate culture as “That’s the way we do things around here,” highlighted a key success factor most persons should learn about any organization employing them.<sup>153</sup> In the church world, polity is the buzzword used in professional settings to explain how things are done. The plural form—polities—conveys the reality that the many and various church denominations do things differently. A simple look at church history reveals polity is a close companion to doctrine in bringing influence and direction to the status and historical journeys of Christian denominations. One concise way to define polity at the denominational level is to call it church politics, or governance.

Besides certain oft-repeated Bible verses, polity has been the main tool of exclusion used against gay pastors. Biblical passages and doctrinal statements are used to support the anti-homosexual polity, but experience and news reports show church leaders

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<sup>152</sup> Tellström, “Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström, Irvine United Congregational Church (UCC), Irvine, California.”

<sup>153</sup> Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

deftly playing the games of church politics to empower the mechanisms of discrimination. Previous discussion of UMC actions demonstrate this systemic and politicized discrimination. Reports of other historical denominations may be found to reveal the same. But there is good news.

In recent decades, anti-homosexual discrimination in church denominations is losing its steam. LGBTQ clergy are being credentialed in various settings, apparently more so each year. This movement is noted in news archives.

In a 2012 article entitled “On Being a Gay Pastor: A Pilgrimage of LGBTQ People,” Brett Webb-Mitchell shared his observation as an ordained Presbyterian pastor:

Today, with a wink and a nod, the Spirit is moving and breaking open closets and merrily confusing denominational politics across the church as well as in other communities of faith. For example, the denominations of the United Church of Christ (UCC), Disciples of Christ (sic), the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), and now the Presbyterian Church (USA), have witnessed the Holy Spirit move among churches in relationship to people who are LGBTQ. The people of God appear to be maturing in welcoming people who are LGBTQ as more of us share our life stories. New relationships are being established between LGBTQ and straight people. Old prejudices are quickly falling to the wayside as Scripture is reinterpreted in light of modern theories of sexuality and biblical scholarship. A refreshing spirit of welcome and acceptance seems to be blowing within faith communities as LGBTQ people are taken in not only as members but as ordained religious leaders whether as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament or as priests and bishops.<sup>154</sup>

Pastor Webb-Mitchell’s optimistic spiritual observation is encouraging. The video interviews convey several aspects of the spiritual ecclesiastical progress in four of the denominations mentioned. However, despite governing developments in these

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<sup>154</sup> Webb-Mitchell, “On Being a Gay Pastor,” 42.

denominations that welcome hiring homosexual clergy, qualified gay pastors are still being over-looked and/or actively excluded in local church hiring. Furthermore, news continues to report qualified persons being denied ordination in some denominational circumstances and defrocked in others. These human hurdles cannot prevent the winking and nodding-Spirit from providing qualified gay pastors and local churches the chance to work together for the good of God's realm.

Naming this do-and-don't dynamic in historical religious practice affords opportunities to address the dynamic in the larger church. This paper, and especially the website, provide persons in other denominational polities the opportunity to draw inferences about how the dynamic functions in their own systems of hiring, pastoral roles, and denominational experiences.

Following are brief polity descriptions for each of the four denominations included in this D/P's scope. The four were chosen as they are the most prominent historical denominations that now welcome gay pastors. Each denomination functions differently, which means the mechanisms of power—even in LGBTQ-welcoming denominations—have the possibility of continuing discrimination. To basically understand the circumstances of pastors in these denominations, especially the 12 interviewed, a cursory knowledge of local church hiring and pastoral role polity is helpful.

### **UCC – Hiring and Pastor's Role**

Local United Churches of Christ hire pastors according to a “search and call” process, typically using the national UCC database of “authorized” ordained ministers

with “privilege of call” who are seeking new opportunities. Usually the search is performed in consultation with leaders of conference and association (large and small

regional areas). Ordained ministers and others working as authorized ministers are credentialed by regional associations of churches throughout



the wider denomination. Each local church is governed only by its voting members in covenant with one another and judicatories. Local congregations create specific church bylaws to govern their business according to their own covenant and statements of vision, mission, and core values. Regional and cultural variations between local churches influence pastoral responsibilities and expectations, which flavor the missional presence of the church in its community context. Noting this, the colloquial saying, “when you’ve seen one UCC church, you’ve seen one UCC church” is apt. Common knowledge shows that, depending on a UCC congregation’s heritage and ethos, the range of commitment to autonomy and/or collegiality varies greatly—some churches are fiercely, perhaps selfishly, independent while others maintain active engagement with other churches and persons in wider church governance.

When a clergy person is hired as the settled (long term) pastor, the covenant is with multiple relationships—involving the local church, the association, the wider church, and the called pastor. Finding clarity in defining the relationships and

professional expectations based on local congregational understandings is essential for a solid start and lasting, effective ministry.<sup>155</sup>

Throughout the almost 5,000 churches of the UCC denomination,<sup>156</sup> the status and quality of welcome extended to gay pastors varies. As noted previously, since 1972, UCC regional associations of churches have authorized for ministry and ordained gay pastors. It started with William R. (Bill) Johnson in the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the UCC.<sup>157</sup> In the UCC, persons are authorized for ordination with privilege of call status by affirmative vote of a regional association of churches within a larger regional conference. In order to be ordained, approved candidates must receive a call (the job offer) approved by the association's church and ministry committee, which is an elected group of clergy and laity from within that association. However, having privilege of call status does not guarantee a job. As Dann Hazel reported in 2000:

Since 1985, UCC congregations have been free to apply for the status of "Open and Affirming (ONA)." Out of sixty-five hundred congregations, only three hundred have achieved that designation, despite the fact that, during 1985, General Synod encouraged all UCC congregations to "study homosexuality"

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<sup>155</sup> Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) Team, "Manual on Ministry," Church Denomination, *United Church of Christ*, last modified Summer 2019, accessed June 26, 2019, [https://www.ucc.org/ministers\\_manual](https://www.ucc.org/ministers_manual).

<sup>156</sup> The Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD), *United Church of Christ Statistical Profile*, Annual Organizational Statistics (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church of Christ, Fall 2018), 4.

<sup>157</sup> Mike Rhodes, The United Church of Christ, *A Position of Faith*, 16mm, digital video, Documentary, Nonprofits & Activism (Contemporary Films, McGraw-Hill Films, 1973), accessed August 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYPvIS9EtzU>.

toward a future declaration of ONA status. Despite the denomination's affirming policies of ordination, gay and lesbian ministers find quickly that UCC ordination does not automatically ensure assignment to a congregation.<sup>158</sup>

More recent statistics in common circulation put the number of UCC congregations nationally at approximately 5,000 and the number of declared ONA status churches is around 1500.<sup>159</sup> While the ratio of welcoming churches has increased significantly, it is still about 30 percent of the congregations in the denomination. While the Open and Affirming Coalition has a stated goal of reaching 100% ONA<sup>160</sup> in the church, the reality of congregationalism and autonomy means that the 100% goal is unlikely. This is due in part to the hyper-congregationalism claimed by some congregations to protect their autonomy. This contributes to why, as it is reported anecdotally, in the UCC a gay pastor can be officially authorized with full ministerial standing and privilege of call, yet homophobia and heterosexism embedded in search committees and congregations prevent interview invitations and hires being made.

In his June 12, 2018, video interview for this D/P, the retired Rev. Dr. Bill Johnson stated that in 1972, he was hired to do ministry among unchurched persons in Southern California. This is the call that made his ordination officially permissible.

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<sup>158</sup> Dann Hazel, *Witness: Gay and Lesbian Clergy Report from the Front*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>159</sup> The Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD), *United Church of Christ Statistical Profile*, 15.

<sup>160</sup> "Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ," *History of a Movement That Changed the Church*, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://openandaffirming.org/about/history/>.

However, when funding ran out for that position, Bill, while still ordained, never again was hired for a pastoral job. His association executive, who personally and professionally supported Bill's ordination, told him that he would not recommend him to churches because he understood they would not hire him. Eighteen years later, with his ordination remaining in good standing, Bill sensed that his hope for a pastoral ministry career was stifled by circumstances, yet his calling to ordained ministry remained. Eventually Bill gained employment in a series of "call" positions in UCC denomination-based executive leadership, which lasted until his retirement in 2013.<sup>161</sup>

The Rev. Peter Johnston was in the first year of his pastorate in Massachusetts when interviewed on August 7, 2018. Prior to ordination he was very active in his regional conference as a lay member and youth leader. He was widely known and admired yet he was closeted in that role despite being out in other aspects of his life. In applying for his first ordained pastor call in the conference, he did not disclose his sexual orientation in his online profile. He chose to inform the search committee in his first meeting with them in person. Later when invited to preach and meet the congregation as the final candidate, he included his sexual orientation in biographical information that was circulated among the congregation during his candidate introduction weekend and the congregational vote to hire or not to hire.<sup>162</sup> He was hired. Among the 12 interviewees

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<sup>161</sup> Johnson, "Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. William R. Johnson, First Openly Gay Man Ordained in the UCC, 1972."

<sup>162</sup> Johnston, "Video Interview with the Rev. Peter Johnston, The First Church of Monson, Congregational UCC, Monson, Massachusetts."

for this D/P, that strategy was not unique to Peter. While the social and denominational conditions increasingly support ordained pastors being out-of-the-closet, some gay pastors still may not disclose sexual orientation until a relationship with the congregation is established. After time together, the pastor may build trust and decide coming out as gay is worth the personal and professional risk.

For local church bodies, UCC polity enables congregations to develop identity and practices that are in alignment with the demographics and attitudes of the congregation and community. UCC actions of the General Synod (national setting) since the 1970s include promoting civil rights for LGBTQs and identifying as Open and Affirming. The General Synod voted to become the first national historical Christian denomination to endorse marriage equality regardless of gender on July 4, 2005. However, the fact that ministerial job candidates sense the need to omit being gay from the application materials in the search and call process adds evidence that homophobia and heterosexism remain present in the process of search, call, and welcoming gay pastors. Despite the influence of the Open and Affirming movement in the UCC for decades, ministerial candidates are not yet able to be open about sexual orientation everywhere in the church.

### **Episcopal Church– Hiring and Pastor’s Role**

The Episcopal Church ordains clergy to distinct roles as deacons or priests (rectors). Deacons serve under supervision of diocesan (regional area) bishops, while priests typically serve local parish churches. In Episcopal parishes, local congregations follow set procedures to advertise, interview, and select a final candidate. The Episcopal

Church is a hierarchical organization. An area bishop must approve a locally selected candidate for hiring. The church's *Constitution and Canons, Rules of Order, and Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) are unifying influences in guiding governance and liturgical practice. Local customs and culture influence the ministries of congregations regionally and mindfully.



In local settings, the clergy person hired is the rector.

Rector is defined in the denomination's online dictionary of terms:

“The priest in charge of a parish. Typically, a rector is the priest in charge of a self-supporting parish, and a vicar is the priest in charge of a supported mission. The rector is the ecclesiastical authority of the parish. The term is derived from the Latin for "rule." The rector has authority and responsibility for worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the parish, subject to the rubrics of the BCP, the constitution and canons of the church, and the pastoral direction of the bishop. The rector is responsible for selection of all assistant clergy, and they serve at the discretion of the rector. The church and parish buildings and furnishings are under the rector's control. The rector or a member of the vestry designated by the rector presides at all vestry meetings”.<sup>163</sup>

The rector has priestly and pastoral roles and responsibilities in the congregation.

Working collaboratively with the vestry, which is the local governing board, the rector has comprehensive authority that is more directive and compelling than most pastors in congregational settings. In the July 28, 2018, interview of the Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft, he reported that anxieties typically associated with arriving to start new jobs in Episcopal parishes were diminished because the BCP and other unifying hierarchical factors enabled smooth sailing into his Cape Cod parish where he was the first openly gay rector.

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<sup>163</sup> “Rector,” Church Denomination, *Episcopal Church*, last modified May 22, 2012, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/rector>.

Shared understandings of common rituals and general business methods enabled an easier arrival and the ability to get his ministry up and running with the staff and congregation.<sup>164</sup>

The first chapter of this D/P notes that Episcopalian denominational leaders were early adopters in welcoming gay clergy.

General Convention governs the Church through constitution and canons, and it advises the Church through resolutions. Until the 1994 General Convention, when the canons were amended to ensure non-discrimination in access to ordination on the basis of sexual orientation, the Church had never addressed lesbian and gay issues through its canons, and hence it may be said that the church has never officially proscribed lesbian and gay behavior on the part of priests or laity, though, in fact, it has often manifested the prejudices of any age.<sup>165</sup>

As members of an American institution, Episcopalians have a system of spirit-influenced polity that favors democratic action in the context of a hierarchical system. Despite the power entrusted to ordained leaders, shifts in national thinking may influence this denomination before others. A check of twentieth century Episcopalian Church history shows that the civil rights and spiritual callings for women and LGBTQs have been on the prow of the Episcopalian ship of faith.

Episcopalians are blessed with an open political process. Many of the same persons who shaped the Constitution of the United States shaped the constitution the Episcopal Church. In our Church it is OK (sic) to respect political processes. Episcopalians believe in the Holy Spirit not as an icon chiseled into stone at Pentecost and allowed to say no new word, but as God's living presence among us. We believe that God expects us both to listen and to think.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Kreft, "Video Interview with the Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft, Retired Priest, Referencing Last Parish, St. David's Episcopal Church, Cape Cod, Massachusetts."

<sup>165</sup> Sears and Williams, *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*, 342.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

This could be one of the influences that enabled the early adoption of women and gay men that preceded other denominations, as noted in this D/P's first chapter.

### **ELCA – Hiring and Pastor's Role**

ELCA churches employ a hybrid procedure of episcopal and congregational process when hiring pastors. In ordinary situations, the area's bishop provides multiple names of approved—the ELCA term is rostered—clergy as candidates for a call. The local congregation interviews and selects from those persons the one to whom to send a letter of call. While there are some acceptable variances for special circumstances, the final approval of a local church's selection must be approved by their bishop.<sup>167</sup>



**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

Pastors hired by local churches are termed Ministers of Word and Sacrament. In May 2014, ELCA Bishop Ray Tiemann of the Southwestern Texas Synod wrote a report synthesizing the provisions of the ELCA constitution as it speaks to pastoral authority and relationships in the local church, including with the church council (CC). He begins with core values: “When a pastor is called by the congregation, there begins a longstanding relationship that is defined as ‘a continuing mutual relationship and commitment.’ ...The Congregation is the ultimate authority. ...The pastor is ‘called’, and

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<sup>167</sup> ELCA Churchwide Ministries, “Call Process,” Church Denomination, *ELCA.Org*, accessed September 21, 2018, <http://www.elca.org/Call Process>. Accessed May 29, 2019

the CC is ‘elected’ by the Congregation in a properly constituted assembly.”<sup>168</sup> In the ELCA, as with presumably other denominations, there may be variances of understanding and practice. Bishop Tiemann addresses that phenomenon: “Sometimes people like to describe the CC (local congregation council) as doing the ‘business dimensions’ of the congregation and the pastor doing the ‘spiritual dimensions’ of the congregation. Constitutionally, the lines are not that clearly drawn. All are called to care for the business and the spiritual needs of the congregation.”<sup>169</sup> Generally speaking about best principles and practices in the local setting, Bishop Tiemann offers this about local relationships: “The CC and pastor are responsible for working as a team to discern and carry out the mission of the congregation and provide a model of healthy community for the sake of the Gospel. ... One is not the boss of the other. Rather, there is a mutuality of purpose and an opportunity for the varied gifts of the Body of Christ to work together for a common purpose.”<sup>170</sup>

In the online comment section at the end of Bishop Tiemann’s report, Bishop Wayne Miller of the Metro Chicago Synod wrote:

A central tenet of the Lutheran tradition is that the Church is the ‘priesthood of ALL BELIEVERS.’ Pastors do not OWN the Church; they SERVE the Church. They do not dominate; they liberate the people of God. They do not lead in isolation, but in collaboration. Leadership is participatory and is based on gifts of the spirit – not status, rank, or title. Governance, in ELCA congregations, belongs

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<sup>168</sup> Bishop Ray Tiemann, Southwestern Texas Synod, *The Relationship between the Pastor and the Congregation Council* (ELCA, May 2014), 1, accessed June 22, 2019, [www.nemnsynod.org/uploads/2/5/8/8/25887261/pastorcouncilrelationship.pdf](http://www.nemnsynod.org/uploads/2/5/8/8/25887261/pastorcouncilrelationship.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 6.

to the congregation meeting, but it is executed by elected leaders (the congregation council, which includes the pastor) who serve as the board of directors for the congregational corporation.<sup>171</sup>

These two bishops emphasize relationships being core to the functioning polity of the church. ELCA Pastor Jeremy McElvain relayed as much in his interview on August 10, 2018. About his introduction to the church and community upon arrival as their first gay pastor, he said “...the way that I was, you know, really kind of announced my arrival into the community was through relationships. That was what this parish had done in the past. It was, it's a small town where people know each other...”<sup>172</sup> This relational methodology, while central, was not entirely effective. As he answered Question 7 about “any disappointments,” he remembers that something arose during the first six months of the job. Jeremy pointed out:

...Even though we were reconciling in Christ and people really appreciated me coming..., there were a couple of people that it was just a little bit too much for them. It was sort of like, it was a little too real that as a gay person, I was standing in front of them blessing the Sacraments and preaching week after week. And I think that really sort of, it prompted them to be ...uncomfortable (and) even prompted them to want to go somewhere else. And, I grew up in a tradition that I didn't stick in because, I didn't feel welcomed in and/or I didn't feel comfortable in. And so, I don't begrudge people who feel the need to leave or to go somewhere different. However, I felt the disappointment.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> McElvain, “Video Interview with the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, First Lutheran Church (ELCA), Centerville, Iowa.”

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

Reporting Jeremy’s experience demonstrates how it may be said in an ersatz Biblical thematic that “pastors do not live by polity alone.” Polity does not protect a pastor from the effects and sways of actions taken and opinions expressed by congregation members. Polity is a framework that surrounds the congregation but does not necessarily provide the full support any pastor needs initially. That support must come from the local congregants who inhabit the polity.

### **PC(USA) – Hiring and Pastor’s Role**

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the call process is neither episcopal nor congregational. Presbyterians consider their polity to be connectional. While local churches hire their pastors, whom congregation members interview and select from candidates who submit credentials to the Pastoral Nominating Committee, the oversight and approval of the area presbytery embodies the denominational connection. One resource manual gives this perspective:



This call is confirmed as the pastor, the church, and the presbytery each say yes to the relationship. This three-way partnership is acted out throughout the pastoral call process with the presbytery having the primary responsibility for oversight of the call process. “No pastoral relationship may be established, changed, or dissolved without the approval of the presbytery.” (G-2.0502).<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Susan E. Roesch Co-chair, PNC, “On Calling a Pastor - Presbyterian Church (USA) Word Doc Synthesis” (First Presbyterian Church, Marietta, OH, 2011), 7, [www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/clc/doc/callingpastor.doc](http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/clc/doc/callingpastor.doc).

Presbyterians generally define ordination beyond the role of clergy. The PC(USA) presents three applications of ordination:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), following the development of Reformed ecclesiology, ordains persons to three ordered ministries: ministers, elders, and deacons. These three ministries represent two ecclesial functions: ministries of the Word performed by presbyters (pastors and elders) and ministries of service performed by deacons.

Ministers, traditionally called “teaching elders,” and elders, traditionally called “ruling elders” are both “presbyters.” Identifying ministers by their teaching role emphasizes the primacy of the Word and the centrality of the “teaching church.” The designation ruling elder is easily misunderstood, however. The historic understanding of the “ruling” exercised by elders has less to do with managerial governance than with ruling out or measuring the work of ministry, the fidelity of communal and personal lives, and the progress of the gospel in the church. The service of deacons is to lead the church in its ministries of compassion (distributing aid, caring directly for the poor, the sick, refugees, and prisoners), and justice (working for equity in society).<sup>175</sup>

The hired pastor works in cooperative association with local ruling elders through the ministry of the session, which is the local governing board. The called pastor acts as the moderator of the session, which offers some level of differentiating authority from the ruling elders who constitute the board. The practical application of the term ordination to non-clergy positions of elder means there may be varying understandings and expectations of clergy authority. It is not unheard of for anecdotes to surface of a local church member purporting equity of authority due to his or her ordination as a church ruling elder, thereby giving life to the caution noted in the previous citation. This is a

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<sup>175</sup> Joseph D. Small, “PC(USA) OGA Ordination,” Church Denomination, *Ministers/Teaching Elders; Ordination*, last modified n/a, accessed June 25, 2019, <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/ministers/ordination/>.

matter for adept training and practical application of clergy and lay leadership as they serve the mission of the local church.

### **Ecumenical Considerations**

With academic caution, it is noted that one resource for a consolidated repository of church polity applying to LGBTQs is “LGBT Clergy in Christianity” located on Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. The page opens with the following, “The ordination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) clergy who are open about their sexuality (or gender identity if transgender), are sexually active if lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or are in committed same-sex relationships is a debated practice within some contemporary Christian Church communities.”<sup>176</sup> The page goes on to present church polities pertaining to general approaches, membership, ordination, and clergy service. While not a universally trusted source in the academy, this webpage ought not be overlooked and may be a valuable source of information to begin one’s credible research.

Many denominations have ecumenical ecclesiastical relationships in various forms permitting and enabling sharing sacramental participation and clergy leadership. In some cases, an exception to the concord is applied to homosexuals. For example, while United Methodists have full communion with the ELCA,<sup>177</sup> the prohibition to

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<sup>176</sup> “LGBT Clergy in Christianity,” *Wikipedia*, September 4, 2018, accessed September 28, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBT\\_clergy\\_in\\_Christianity&oldid=858060666](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBT_clergy_in_Christianity&oldid=858060666).

<sup>177</sup> “Full Communion Partners,” *ELCA.Org*, accessed June 27, 2019, [http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical and Inter Religious Relations/Full Communion](http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical%20and%20Inter%20Religious%20Relations/Full%20Communion).

homosexual clergy and same-sex weddings in the UMC is problematic to full collaboration in ministry. It is highly unlikely that a gay ELCA pastor, fully credentialed and empowered otherwise, would be welcome to a pastoral appointment in a standard UMC arrangement. A straight ELCA pastor with the same credentials would face no hurdles regarding sexual orientation, but would face opposition to performing same sex weddings, which are endorsed by ELCA polity. So, the ecumenical partnership has flaws.

Remembering the history and circumstances presented earlier pertaining to the UMC, leads to the recommendation that gay pastors seeking jobs and getting hired in the Episcopal, UCC, ELCA, and PC(USA) denominations carefully consider how the call impacts their individual integrity and sense of well-being. In the course of serving congregations, it is likely that news and influences from church and society will produce occasional existential challenges to consider. Some examples from first-time gay pastors appear in the pages of this D/P and on the accompanying website. Other resources for this consideration are on the pages of the D/P website. For the most part, the interviewees talk about being solid in their sense of ministerial call despite the many anti-gay messages that are still generally communicated in church and secular media, interpersonal communications, and specific congregants' reactions. Readers are encouraged to visit the website to gain understanding from the thoughts and experiences presented.

## Chapter 4

### THE PROJECT

The core substance of this D/P is the website, [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), which includes more than 190 video clips and video resources, plus a plan for “7 Monthly Meetups” for congregations and gay pastors to use to establish and build their ministry covenant. This paper is supplemental to the website, and offers additional content to gay pastors, their congregations, and interested others.



The 2012 inspiration for this project occurred during lunch in a café in San Anselmo, California, when newly installed director of the SFTS Advanced Pastoral Studies program, the Rev. Dr. Virsten Choy, asked me what sort of D/P I might want to do when the time was right. As a prospective DMin student visiting schools that summer of my first sabbatical, I replied, “Something about welcome.” This is what aligned with my spiritual interests and church-start experience. I added that, based upon my business career, I would hope to create something online with video. During my SFTS seminars, the idea formulated for an internet-based, practical resource to support LGBTQ persons in the church; with my business and media background, delivering an online digital project became my plan. Dr. Choy was encouraging as he advised the benefit of working with materials and processes already familiar to me and building on that knowledge. He

also prescribed that the project should be innovative and beneficial to the whole church with its content. Those encouragements became my academic parameters.

The specific title of this D/P emerged during the third D/P seminar I took at SFTS. As the small group of clergy met in a session to discuss their various plans, Dr. Scott Sullender asked each student to state succinctly their theme and purpose. At my turn, I said I wanted to help gay clergy “stick the landing” upon arriving for their new jobs. Doing so would enable them and the congregation make their mutual covenant work. My D/P design and scope developed from that moment.

When the idea coalesced, I used previous business connections to research, reserve, and purchase the URL rights to “gaypastorwelcome.com” as the Internet address for the project. I chose the name from a few variations of words on the same theme because the combination made sense, was available, and will be easy to remember. The name aligned with my marketing goals of being quickly recognizable as an indicator of the website’s purpose and a succinct clue to the content presented.

### **Technology**

My primary role in this D/P was as video producer/web content developer and, secondarily as the author of the supplemental paper. The multi-faceted role required me to use technological and human resources. Having career experience with business and church communications on video and internet platforms, initially I thought I would be able to perform all the online content production myself. That proved to be beyond my skill level as I realized capturing the video interviews with persons across the country would be more complicated than imagined. Three interviews were produced by me in

locations I could drive to and use my iPhone and iPad to record. However, editing the clips in a timely fashion became a challenge. Both downloading the very large video files from camera to computer and uploading to YouTube after editing were extremely slow. After a few weeks of painful frustration, I concluded the time estimates I made for the proposal schedule were significantly lower than the amount needed. Alternative methods were necessary in order to complete the video interview portion of the project.

After multiple consultations at the nearest Apple Store, the need for higher-grade video editing and web development software, along with the skills to use them, motivated the search for other sources. Colleagues in ministry advised me of two online resources that became my standards. I subscribed to [www.Zoom.us](http://www.Zoom.us) video conferencing and recording services for the interview sessions and used [www.Rev.com](http://www.Rev.com) for transcribing the video interviews. In addition, both platforms offered cloud storage for various fees. Using the Zoom online video app for recording enabled me to transfer the large data files of video content between computer and the Internet more conveniently, thereby saving much time. Quite frankly, finding these two resources—Zoom and Rev—was a significant breakthrough for the viability of the project.

In practice, Zoom was easy to use, but recording the video clips so they were usable in the D/P was complex. After a few test-runs with friends, I figured out how to do one-on-one video recording, segmented the interviews by question, and activated the recording function in such a way as to minimize the amount of editing to be done. Due to the remote nature of the recording process, I could not control the conditions of each pastor's location. Through trial and error, I learned how to coach them on lighting and background so we could get an adequate picture. This required me to be flexible and

tolerant of less than picture-perfect conditions. Once the files were available, I uploaded them to Rev for transcripts. Each video and accompanying written transcripts are accessible on the website.

Another issue occurred in web development. Having created websites on my own, I thought I could do so handily. However, I was too inexperienced with YouTube to comprehend how to assemble YouTube playlists and marry them to a website so they functioned smoothly. Being in the executive program, I made an executive decision. With a local referral, I found a business communications entrepreneur willing to work with me at an affordable rate. He took the materials I provided, designed the look of the website based on my operational specifications, completed necessary video editing, and brought the website live over the course of several months. The website offers video clips with transcripts embedded in the YouTube link. Since our budget was very small, the high quality of the work that went into this website is greatly valued.

### **Content**

The content of the website delivers two products: (1) 12 interviews presenting select experiences and insight from men who have been first-time gay pastors in predominantly heterosexual churches and (2) a plan for 7 Monthly Meetups designed to facilitate the congregation's welcome. The meetups plan is designed to undergird the mutual covenant during the pastor's first months of service.

My methodology for securing interview candidates was based primarily on my business sales, prospecting, and networking experience. As academic resources were

compiled during research, occasionally names would emerge of persons who were first-time gay ministers in a location. Local papers typically carried an article of introduction, sometimes presenting a tone of curiosity at the novelty of a publicly gay man arriving to shepherd the parish. In addition, several interviewees were persons previously



"Brother Thomas, here, will take your hat. Brother Feedlestein will take your coat, and Dr. Nicely will handle the baggage from your previous church."

*Source: www.preaching today.com*

known to me in church circles, and other interviewees were referrals from them. Some referrals came incidentally from current classmates or professional colleagues in ministry as a result of conversations either in person or online. Not every pastor I contacted responded back. A few pastors who responded to the invitation positively, inexplicably stopped communicating. Despite two or three efforts to reestablish contact, I had to let them go. One ghosted our interactions after several months by ceasing to respond to phone calls or emails about scheduling. This was challenging for me, though I did not let it derail progress. I also decided to include the Rev. Dr. Bill Johnson in the group of interviewees. Even though Bill did not serve as a pastor for the bulk of his career, his historical significance and the facts of his life were among my key inspirations. That led me to think he would have valuable and interesting things to say, which he did.

After introductory written and verbal communications, 11 gay pastors consented to be interviewed on digital video for this project. After those interviews were completed, I realized all of the pastors interviewed were white men and determined that not including

a person of color was a disservice to the project and the church in terms of LGBTQ community authenticity and project diversity. Therefore, I sought referrals among the interviewees, colleagues in ministry, and members of my local church who had national UCC experience. One connection led to another, and a gay Black pastor was referred to me, expressed interest, participated, and established the final group of twelve.

20 questions were created and approved at the design scope proposal stage and remained in use throughout (Appendix D). As the questions were used in interviews, it became apparent that, due to interview time constraints and contextual circumstances, all questions were either not pertinent to every pastor or not able to be included as the allotted time ran out. Consequently, I determined the selection of questions asked in each interview based on circumstances. The sessions varied somewhat, though not greatly. For each interview, I contacted the pastors via email or telephone. If they consented to be interviewed, we set a telephone appointment to get acquainted and oriented to the process. They were provided a copy of the design/scope document along with two permission forms based on SFTS approved formats, which were customized by me for this D/P and approved by the APS department head (Appendices B and C).

### **Interviewees**

The following pastors fit the parameters of being the first gay pastor to serve a church not LGBTQ demographically dependent. The biographical information provided was gathered from local church websites and personal conversations. The photos included here are screengrabs from their video interviews or files they provided. Local church website URLs are supplied for the pastors still actively serving the welcoming

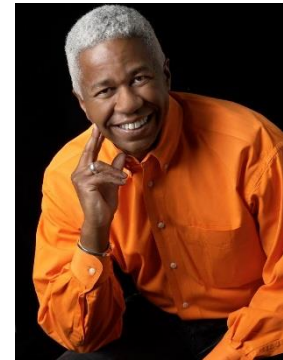
congregation they served at the time of their video interviews for this D/P.

The Rev. Joe Amico is the pastor of Tabernacle Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Salem, Massachusetts. Joe's career includes being both a pastor and an addiction counselor. Joe has served churches in Wisconsin, California, and Vermont. His spiritual background includes Roman Catholicism and United Methodism.



When he came out as a gay man, he was removed from the UMC by his bishop. When he began serving churches in the UCC, he did so as an open and self-affirming gay pastor. Joe has been the first gay pastor for three UCC churches.

The Rev. Ron Buford is the pastor for the Congregational Church of Sunnyvale—UCC, Sunnyvale, California. Ron is the first gay pastor and the first Black pastor for this congregation, which is adjacent to the Silicon Valley. Earlier in his career, he was a corporate marketing executive. He later became the consultant and national church spokesperson for the “God is still speaking,” campaign of the



UCC. In that role, he was encouraged to pursue ordained ministry and decided to go to seminary. After graduation, he was called to be the local church pastor in Sunnyvale. As a gay person of color in a predominantly heterosexual and white church culture, he has additional factors at play as he seeks to lead with integrity. <http://www.uccsunnyvale.org/>

The Rev. Greg Davis was the first gay pastor of Northwest Community Church, UCC, which was founded at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When interviewed, he was in the search and call process after leaving Las Vegas to support his husband's job transfer to San Diego. Greg pursued a Christian ministry career after spending decades in show business. After seminary, he got the Northwest Community Church job by going outside the official system at that time and networking his way there. He was the congregation's third pastor. In his latest career move, after searching for many months, with several unsuccessful interactions, Greg was called in the fall of 2019 as the first gay pastor of the Community Church of Poway, UCC, in Poway, California.



The Rev. Bill Ingraham is the senior pastor of the 300-year-old First Church Congregational, UCC, in Methuen, Massachusetts. He has served five churches as the first gay pastor. Bill came to First Church after serving an Albuquerque, New Mexico, church for five and a half years. Previously he served churches in Texas, Kansas, Virginia, and Michigan. Bill is a Texas native and an ordained UCC minister for more than three decades.



<https://www.firstchurchmethuen.com/>

The Rev. C. Dale Jackson is pastor of Riverside Presbyterian Church, PC (USA), in Riverside, Illinois. Prior to this location, he served churches in Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. Dale also worked for the national offices of the denomination in Louisville, Kentucky.



<https://www.rpcusa.org/>

The Rev. Dr. William R. (Bill) Johnson was the first openly gay man ordained in the modern Christian church by way of the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Nevada Conference, UCC, on July 25, 1972. Some of Bill's biographical story appears earlier in this paper (Chapter One). Additionally, his extensive career experience is detailed at the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network.



<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/> Also, a video about his ordination is included at: <https://gaypastorwelcome.com/related-topics/>.

The Rev. Peter Johnston is the pastor of the First Church of Monson, Congregational, UCC, in Monson, Massachusetts. Before beginning his work as an ordained pastor, Peter served ten UCC congregations in a variety of ministries including Christian education, youth ministry, church administration, and music. Immediately prior to Monson, he served as



minister of the Quincy Point Congregational Church, UCC, in Quincy, Massachusetts, while completing his ministerial studies at Boston University School of Theology. Peter took an innovative approach to the search and call process by creating a personal website that included information that the UCC's system would not accept. While Peter came out to the Monson search committee at their first meeting, he was not out in his profile, which was an indication of the homophobia and heterosexism some clergy still contend with in churches. Ultimately, the congregation voted unanimously to call him as their pastor. <http://office12806.wixsite.com/mysite>

The Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones is senior minister of First Central Congregational, UCC, in Omaha, Nebraska. In 2010, he and his husband moved from a predominately gay congregation in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to this large downtown church where Scott serves as



the congregation's first gay pastor. He is also a lecturer in the Philosophy Department of Creighton University and the author of *Open: A Memoir of Faith, Family, and Sexuality in the Heartland* (2018). Scott currently serves as Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Nebraska Conference of the UCC, on the Advisory Board for the Equality Fund of the Omaha Community Foundation, and on the Advisory Board for the Omaha Salvation Army. Prior to this call, Scott was pastor of the Cathedral of Hope church-start in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and served churches in Arkansas and Texas as an associate pastor, a youth pastor, and a college minister. Scott remains a member of Heartland Clergy for Inclusion and was a coauthor of the "Heartland Proclamation." He

also coordinated the #ReadyToMarry\_campaign for marriage equality in Nebraska. Additionally, Scott was a leader of the Equal Omaha Coalition that lobbied successfully in 2012 for the passage of Omaha’s Equal Employment Ordinance.

<https://firstcentral.org/>

The Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft is a retired Episcopal priest, who referenced in his interview his last parish job at St. David’s Episcopal Church on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. He served parishes in San Francisco; Palm Springs, California; and



Buffalo, New York. In those places, he was the first gay pastor to serve openly. About his moves, Armand said, “The liturgical unity of the Episcopal church means that some factors are constant from church to church, so that becomes a source for stability in the arrival.”<sup>178</sup> However, not every location provided a happy one. Armand carries the trauma of one past parish experience that is yet so hurtful he did not want to talk about it. I mention this because the effects of past rejections in personal and professional life, which many gay pastors carry, are a reality that congregations ought to affirm with understanding and hopes for healing. One may speculate that, with future advances in welcoming homosexuals into the fullness of society and church, these traumatic effects lessen.

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<sup>178</sup> Kreft, “Video Interview with the Rev. Fr. Armand Kreft, Retired Priest, Referencing Last Parish, St. David’s Episcopal Church, Cape Cod, Massachusetts.”

The Rev. Jeremy McElvain is pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Centerville, Iowa. Not only is he the first gay pastor in Centerville, he thinks he is the first gay Lutheran pastor in Iowa. As a native of Centerville, he is serving in his hometown. Prior to serving at First Lutheran, Jeremy served parishes in Missouri and Iowa.



<http://www.firstlutherancenterville.org/>

When the Rev. Kevin Strickland was interviewed, he was the assistant to the presiding bishop and the executive for worship at the ELCA head office in Chicago, Illinois. Kevin was both a local church pastor in two locations and a denominational executive. In the Chicago role, he was the first gay clergy at the church's national leadership table. On June 2, 2019, Kevin was elected to serve a six-year term as bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia.



When he was interviewed, the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström was close to retiring as pastor of Irvine United Congregational Church (UCC) in Irvine, California. Prior to Irvine, Paul was a pastor in the Los Angeles area, and was a working actor in New York City before entering ordained ministry. On the day of his ordination, as he and the celebrating clergy were



recessing down the center aisle of the church at the end of the service, someone handed him a derogatory note criticizing him for his presence. Later in his ministerial career, on a candidating Sunday, after waiting for the congregation's vote results, Paul was told the unexpected news of the congregation's rejection because he was gay. Later, Paul was called to Irvine, which was a church that decided to be very forthcoming in their mission to be a progressive voice in historically conservative Orange County, California—the birthplace of the Ronald Reagan for President movement. Paul retired from active ministry in 2019.

## 7 Monthly Meetups

Viewing the online video interviews from the 12 gay pastors and the selected topical resources is suitable for individual and small group use. Additionally, I suggest that a plan for seven monthly meetings during the earliest months of the gay pastor's arrival would benefit and strengthen the group covenant. The plan for meetups is located at <https://gaypastorwelcome.com/7-month-plan/> and is recommended for consideration and use by churches in the process of considering and hiring gay pastors. The plan is also available for review at Appendix E.

The small group meeting plan may be utilized by the welcoming congregation and is based on personal experience in leading small groups, research, and pedagogical consultations. The plan relies on seven monthly meetings of an ad hoc small group to facilitate the welcoming; and begins one month before the new pastor's arrival then continues for six months. This small group may consist of the previously established pastoral search committee, or a newly formed task force established by the church's board or council, or a pastor relations committee adjunct group, or some other formulation appropriate to the congregation.

For the group to operate efficiently, it should be no less than three and no more than nine in number, including both the new pastor and the church's chief lay officer. Drawing members from a representative group of congregants is preferred. In alignment with educator Chuck Stewart's training guidelines, I recommend representation includes at least one gay man. If there are no gay men in the congregation, perhaps a gay community representative could be recruited to assist with welcome and transition. The small group should not be majority LGBTQ. Some semblance of congregational

representative balance of perspectives and experience is essential to the group's credible work.

Stewart presents, "four elements of effective teaching applied to sexually stigmatized communities:"

1. **Comprehensible:** ... input needs to start at students' understanding of gender, sex, and productive work and be extended toward the program's goal of reducing homophobia and heterosexism. ...It is best to start with the student's own feelings and experiences. The teacher then assists the students to a greater understanding of gay and lesbian issues.
2. **Meaningful:** For a program of sexually stigmatized communities to have meaning, it must be relevant to the organizational members' subculture....
3. **Modeled:** Lesbian and gay leaders and organizational members must be willing and able to share all aspects of their personal sexual affectional experiences and thoughts—as is now done by heterosexuals.
4. **Authentic:** Treating sexual orientation as a one-time workshop reinforces the belief that it is not related to the work environment and that it must be endured. Instead, sexual orientation issues must become part of the daily routine and conversation. Homosexual behaviors and relationships need to be shared around the water cooler on Monday morning just as heterosexual ones are shared now. On the job, workers need to see other workers display respect toward the gay and lesbian community and eliminate heterosexist assumptions.<sup>179</sup>

Allowing adequate time for good work in these sessions is important. Stewart recommends: "Four hours is the minimum in which to attempt a social reconstructionist approach. This belief has been expressed to me by many of the leading homophobia

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<sup>179</sup> Stewart, *Sexually Stigmatized Communities: Reducing Heterosexism and Homophobia: An Awareness Training Manual*, 19.

reduction educators.”<sup>180</sup> The amount of time Stewart suggests is incorporated into the design and plan for the “7 Monthly Meetups.” Seven meetings of at least an hour each will exceed Stewart’s recommendation. My recommendation is that the first meeting held the month prior to the new pastor’s arrival be a 90-minute gathering. This is an important time to get acquainted with the matter at hand, discover and record concerns or issues that are on the minds of the congregants, and offer assurances of a safe and caring process. Because this D/P brings innovation to welcoming newly hired gay clergy, resources for that process were found to be scarce. Therefore, I drew from Stewart’s work in other professional fields to create the plan I developed. The number and breadth of his published materials influenced me to include his work specifically.

For cultural awareness training with police departments and school systems, Stewart created a complete manual for awareness regarding sexually stigmatized communities. The extensive work includes theory, lesson plans, and is aimed at reducing heterosexism and homophobia. (See pp. 33-42 for a fuller discussion of homophobia and heterosexism.) While the context of his training manual was oriented toward public service agencies, Stewart, in his introduction, notes that the principles, tools, and practices may be modified to suit other communities. I concluded his findings and recommendations could be applied to local church congregations.

These meetups are intended to be of value to the new pastor as well as the congregation. The congregation will consider various issues and matters that may arise

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 43.

with the arrival of a new pastor. The new pastor benefits by the immediate establishment of a relational group. When asked in Question 4 how their arrival was communicated to the community, the pastors had wide variance in their answers—from basically nothing to several social gatherings. The Rev. Peter Johnston exposed a need when he said, “...because I had spent most of my life in cities and they have a beautiful parsonage and it's out in the woods and there are bears. Actual animal bears that inhabit the area. So, one of the challenges is, I need to create some kind of a community either by a meet-up group, or something like that but at least there's the internet and I'm not isolated. I can communicate with other people.”<sup>181</sup> The Rev. Dr. Scott E. Jones reported: “They did not plan a kind of 'get to know you' event, on the candidating weekend. I actually had to press for that. On the Saturday night before, then there was a potluck supper. And then I talked, and (provided) Q and A to answer any questions.”<sup>182</sup>

Interviewees noted, in a couple of cases, that the congregation sent out a letter to the members announcing their arrival. In most cases, routine mention of interests and family passively revealed that the pastor was gay, e.g. announcing the husband's or partner's name. Sometimes the local media was notified and requested an interview. The Rev. C. Dale Jackson noted that was typical in his experience, and that the newsworthiness of the announcement frequently rests upon the pastor's sexual

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<sup>181</sup> Johnston, “Video Interview with the Rev. Peter Johnston, The First Church of Monson, Congregational UCC, Monson, Massachusetts.”

<sup>182</sup> Jones, “Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones, First Central Congregational UCC, Omaha, Nebraska.”

orientation.

Every time I've been called to a church, at some point in the first few weeks the newspaper reporter from the local paper comes along to do an article about the new pastor. I was naïve and was not at all thinking that he wanted to interview me as their first gay pastor. I thought he was just gonna interview me as their pastor. It must have been, oh it had to have been within the first three questions that we get to sexuality already. Just continued questions about my sexuality, not questions about what I was excited about being in Riverside, not questions about what I thought our future was going to be together. They were all questions about me being gay. I actually remember at one point in the interview saying, "If the only thing we're gonna talk about is me being gay, I'm not sure I wanna do this interview. Because I don't think that that really captures why RPC has called me to be their minister." So, then he changed direction...."<sup>183</sup>

In talking about their arrivals and ministries in the new church, more than one pastor noted that they wanted to be known as a good pastor, not only a gay pastor. This was not a reflection on their self-understanding of professional competence. Rather, the active expression of such identity concerns appears to be a soft expression of continued internalized homophobia. For pastors who grew up in previous times with more socio-cultural discrimination in force, such personal tinges of latent homophobia are completely understandable. As more gay pastors are hired and covenants are made, the novelty and the concerns will most assuredly dissipate. With effective welcome and arrival strategies—like using the “7 Monthly Meetups” plan at the beginning of a gay pastor’s tenure—the first steps in strong covenants are made.

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<sup>183</sup> Jackson, “Video Interview with the Rev. C. Dale Jackson, Riverside Presbyterian Church, Riverside, Illinois.”

## Feedback and Evaluation

As [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com) went live, I sent dozens of links to colleagues and professional groups asking for feedback. My D/P advisor and I created a feedback form, which my web developer linked to the site. I had hoped for a strong response from social media groups I belong to, including the UCC clergy private group. An example of my social media request can be noted in the posting I made on a restricted and moderated Facebook group for clergy called, Things they didn't teach us in Seminary.

For my D.Min. Dissertation Project, I created a new website: [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), which can be a resource for church members who are considering, or have already hired, a gay pastor for the first time. It can also be a resource to pastors considering such a situation. Denominational leaders may refer this site to congregations as a resource. Interviews with 12 gay pastors resulting in 190+ video clips, a 7-month arrival orientation plan, and various video resources are provided for user exploration. To augment my paper, I am asking people on various social media platforms and other settings to visit the website and provide user feedback, which will be referenced broadly in the evaluation chapter. So please visit the website – surf, snack, and see what you find. Thank you.

The response from several individuals was positive, but the volume of feedback was low.

Additional requests were sent to denominational leaders I know, including heads of welcoming organizations, conference ministers, and consultants. More than 100 requests were made via social media to individuals for feedback. In more than one case, promises of forwarding may have been fulfilled, but the replies containing feedback are yet to be realized. Helpful feedback came from my former conference minister. The Rev. Dr. Jane Heckles, who is a retired UCC minister, having been a UCC denominational leader with national setting board and conference staff positions, responded rather quickly with this encouraging note:

I just started looking at your new website which looks FAB! Over the coming

days I'll have a chance to look all the way through and share. Congratulations on a great vision! The first/only interview I have watched so far is Joe Amico – love Joe, great pastor! But I was a little shocked to hear him say he was the first gay pastor to serve Tabernacle. Rev. Elizabeth King served there for maybe a decade in the 90s, I don't remember the exact dates. Her partner at that time is my best friend, so I was around!

My response to her historical question was that the focus of this project is on references to “out gay male” first-time hires as the operative criteria for interview. She replied:

Hi Kevin, thanks for the clarification. As I read down to the bottom of your landing page and then listened to the entirety of Joe's interview I found that it was clear. When I wrote my DMin thesis on Open and Affirming Churches back in the late '90s, there were only 204 churches in the study. So, the pool was limited which helped immensely. So, I understand needing to limit the pool for research! I think it struck a note with me as an 'older' lesbian, we were invisible for so long and had to fight to be seen and heard. And, in church culture that is not very sophisticated about identities, for a lot of people "gay" means both men and women. So, I try to specify gay MEN when that's who I mean. Then the lesbians won't feel overlooked, they just know it's not about them :)

With that feedback, we changed the text on the website's home page to include the phrase “gay male pastor.”

The concern about my focus on gay men was regularly noted in feedback. Even with the academic caveat appearing in announcements and messages, the unease persisted. One clergy woman posting on a restricted Facebook group for clergy in a mainline denomination wrote: “This was my question as well. As a lesbian who searched for a position for over a year it came down to me being (in) a same-sex marriage that took me out of the running. The churches flat out told me. Women have a harder time to begin with, then when you add in being non-hetero, it makes it even harder.” Her lament indicates the need for additional advocacy and support aimed toward hiring LGBTQ pastors generally. When I posted the request for the first time on my personal Facebook

page, a transgender clergy person posted this response: “Nice work, brother! I hope once you have your doctorate degree, you will consider doing writings that can be specific for each acronym of the LGBTQ community and, perhaps, even pastors with physical disabilities. I could see you doing a series of writings for each segment.”

In some cases, I asked persons associated with the church I serve to visit the website and offer feedback. One response was thoughtful and helpful. As a member of the Community of Christ in Canada, Bob Klombies is a retired lay minister who served churches in Canada before retiring. He offered these comments:

I’ve looked at the website and, although I didn’t view all the videos, I did see all of one and parts of a couple of others.

CONTENT interviews with pastors are very well done and cover a wide range of topics. I wonder if a few similar type interviews with the principal leader, e.g. Moderator, of a few churches would add to the congregational dimension.

I felt the Seven Monthly Meetups were an excellent way of keeping the focus on supporting the new pastor and improving communication with the people. However, I think the meetings seem to be mainly for leaders, and even though one is scheduled for a month before the new pastor comes, I didn’t see anything specific to educate the congregation. The Rev. Dr. Paul Tellstrom refers to a video used for this purpose.

EASE OF USE. I found the site easy to navigate. The volume in your introductory video could be higher.

UNDERSTANDABILITY. The instructions were clear, and the description of each meeting agenda was good. Para 2.F term “organizational polarities” is a bit hard to get one’s head around!

I found the interviews and the pastors’ experiences to be very moving in many cases, and it was good to hear of those whose experience was pretty positive. Maybe society is moving in the right direction and dragging some of the churches along with it!

I hope this has been of some help.... Good luck with the final stage of your doctoral program! I’m sure the result will be very useful for churches and pastors going through what can be a challenging time.

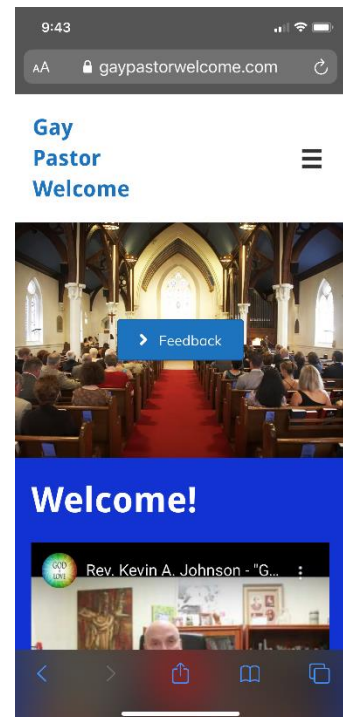
From his professional office in Washington, DC, the Rev. Paul Nixon, a UMC clergy, a nationally recognized congregation development consultant, and a published author, reviewed the website and responded:

The feedback button eludes my eyes on my phone. My response: A congregation is often seeking to live its welcoming values in calling or receiving a gay clergy person. But since most churches are mostly straight, they may experience awkwardness in welcoming and bonding with their pastor. In some ways it's simply an intercultural competency issue. This website suggests really practical ways to go about setting a good relational and working foundation with a new pastor.

In response to Nixon's feedback, the web developer made the home page feedback button/tab more visible on mobile devices and desktop computers. Despite making the feedback mechanism more obvious, it is seldom used.

cathy knight (her preference to self-identify with the lower case) is the recently retired, longtime executive director of the Church Within a Church Movement (www.cwac.us). The group promotes a vision for justice and inclusion in American Methodism and throughout society. She and I worked closely together for several years as I was national coordinator for the organization. She gave feedback echoing others:

Hi Kevin - cathy knight here. I appreciate the gap i (sic) think your website fills. Preparing two parties unknown to each other to dance together is important. It took me a bit too long to see why this site was focused on gay men only. Having that statement made sooner would calm my expectation to see someone like me.



Retired UCC clergy, and former UMC member from Boston, the Rev. Patricia Walton has a gay son. She is a member of the congregation I serve, and responded with, “I enjoyed hearing different experiences although it would have been helpful to hear from more than one ethnic minority. Listening to each question for each person felt time consuming.” An anonymous comment, submitted via the feedback form, offered a suggestion for our technology, which could be built into the site at a future date: “Some of the pages are text-heavy, probably due to the nature of the academic work. If your webmaster can manage it, perhaps the 7-month plan could be a series of buttons as well as a PDF download.” These comments offered a range of feedback that represents a valuable set of insights.

Web development practices are growing more inclusive of persons with disabilities. Therefore, websites available for public use need to ensure accessibility by persons with disabilities as an important element of the creative process. For that reason, steps were taken by my web developer to ensure accessibility on the site. After reviewing [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), Sangeet Mann, who is the arts and systems librarian for the Armacost Library at University of Redlands, provided this feedback:

Overall, I appreciate the thoughtfulness you’ve put into the content for this site. The home page clearly calls to your audience (gay pastors who have been appointed to serve a congregation and the congregation members themselves) and sends a message of “welcome” through the text and your video introduction.

I tried running your page through [www.cynthiasays.com](http://www.cynthiasays.com) , an accessibility checker that has been recommended to help web authors structure their content and navigation to give easier access to people using screen readers or with other needs. You are doing a lot of good things here with the use of headings, a high contrast color scheme and text that can easily be parsed by a screen reader. The welcome page does seem quite long for someone using a reader exclusively. (I tried using VoiceOver on my desktop iMac to simulate reading the page) You

could move the content on “How to Use This Site” and “Academic Limitations” to their own pages with links from the welcome page.

I had one other suggestion to reword the menu headings at the top right of the page to be actions (“view videos,” “plan a support group”, etc.) rather than names of resources. It wasn’t clear to me what the menu items were for when I first saw the page, although I understood once I read through the home page and watched your introductory video. Also, getting feedback from audience members is a good way to confirm that you have the right categories in your site menu and are using meaningful terms.

Thanks again for developing this resource. I hope that many pastors and congregations are able to make use of it and it can help these churches to flourish.

The purpose of this project is to create and support [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com).

As noted in my approved design/scope proposal, the project does not end with the submission of this paper. I assume feedback will continue to arrive, and I am committed to respond to comments and suggestions faithfully. The website will be maintained by me for the foreseeable future. Resources, interviews, and functionality may be added. As I understand there to be an unofficial 10-year shelf-life for D/P relevance, I hope to ensure the website lives out its usefulness. I am not sure that I will have the resources or be able to create sites pertaining to additional minority communities, as many respondents have suggested. However, I am hopeful that others will see that vision as a viable project for their educational/social justice purposes.

In the years after the café luncheon with Dr. Choy, the LGBTQ community, along with millions of straight allies, have been empowered to celebrate same sex marriage – including my own – as the law of our land. The LGBTQ community seems to have more visibility, public credibility, and social capital than ever before. Yet, religious setbacks continue. November 2019 news reports told of an ordained United Methodist lesbian

forced to go on leave of absence after church charges were filed against her for being a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. Her removal from active clergy status in the UMC precedes the upcoming 2020 General Conference, when the issues of gay clergy and marriage equality will again wreak legislative havoc. So, while the four denominations considered in this D/P are continuing to welcome gay pastors, the general religious community still maintains prohibitions. Such current and future religious and social upheaval means the need for [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com) remains vital.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSIONS

As the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones finished his answer to Question 18, he expressed his vision for the future of churches everywhere: “They can become so radically inclusive that they can enjoy the benefits of all of the people that the Holy Spirit has called into ministry.”<sup>184</sup> His hope is stirred by knowing the spread of congregations deciding to hire and welcome gay pastors is slow. As noted earlier, perhaps the current pace bodes well for a lasting effect of comfort and appreciation, developing over time. One can hope that churches hiring gay pastors and experiencing their positive leadership will tell others of their success and be open to repeating the experience. But the rarity of such situations indicates that fears and blockages remain. The bottleneck on this progress is likely caused by a sense of uncertainty, which accompanies most new ventures. This D/P provides a creative approach for generating confidence in the excellent potential of hiring gay pastors in the future.

This concluding chapter presents several findings made during the two years of bringing this D/P to fruition.

1. This is a new field of study: In approaching the topic of welcoming gay pastors hired by congregations, accessible research is spotty, existential experience is limited, and data therefore is unattainable. The advancements of LGBTQ civil rights have engaged and advanced the status of LGBTQ persons in churches, but the benefit is not

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<sup>184</sup> Jones, “Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones, First Central Congregational UCC, Omaha, Nebraska.”

always mutually experienced by LGBTQ clergy. Feedback received that followed the roll-out of the website was laden with wishes for similar resources in support of lesbians and trans pastors.

While lamenting the dearth of sources on the benefits or drawbacks of hiring LGBTQ clergy, one may conclude that the need for more research and development is evident. To that end, this D/P begins the contribution to the academy. The 12 video interviews recorded for this work are available online and may be used as part of studies on other topics. Because the goal of this D/P was to allow the pastors free rein with unscripted responses to the interview questions, it is possible to see how they think. While there were some similarities in a few of the responses, these 12 fully credentialed clergy exhibited individual qualities suited to professional ministry. It was also clear that they were well-matched to their congregations and are doing well in their church settings.

2. Many gay clergy are trauma survivors: Living in the current age, when civil rights for the LGBTQ community are expanding—albeit haltingly so—the fact remains that many gay clergy lived through times when their sexual orientation and self-identity were subject to ridicule and discrimination. One of the interviewees carried the trauma of a past parish experience that remains so hurtful he would not talk about it. Similarly, my story appears in Chapter One, which presents an example of discrimination leading to dismissal, a traumatic experience with broad and lasting impact. The effects that gay pastors carry from past rejections in personal and professional life are a reality that congregations need to affirm. A congregation's understanding of these issues offers hope for healing. One may speculate that, with future advances in welcoming homosexuals into the fullness of society and church, these traumatic effects may be fewer.

3. Among the D/P's 12 gay pastors, theological issues were neither troubling nor affecting them personally. It was clear from their answers to Questions 14 through 17, they had reached a sense of self affirmation that included their connection with God. Furthermore, they had done the inner mental and spiritual work to be comfortable as gay men in their community relationships. While in one case there was slight negative community-based pressure reported, based on differing theological understandings, such pressure was rare among the 12 and unaffecting to most of them.

4. Emotional selfcare is important: Utilizing professional help for personal therapeutic support is a valuable resource. The Rev. Jeremy McElvain, answering Question 16, said:

One of the things I have found for myself is having a very good counselor, having a very good spiritual director, seeking people out who are going to be supportive, and having a good friend network. That has helped me, especially as a pastor, to have people to talk to that are no way affiliated with the parish or the town or anything else because I'm able to speak in ways I can't speak in other circles. That has become a tool for me, a tool to be able to overcome some of that internalized guilt and fear and homophobia, that stuff that's been entrenched in me growing up in rural Iowa where homosexuality was not a welcome aspect to people, especially as a kid growing up in the '70s and '80s and '90s.<sup>185</sup>

All 12 pastors interviewed had coming-out stories that involved some level of struggle with spiritual and social ramifications. As a result, they are not like average persons. Beyond their sexual orientation and in light of it, their experiences of life may be either enhanced or damaged. In the case of the Rev. Ron Buford, this differentiation was

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<sup>185</sup> McElvain, "Video Interview with the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, First Lutheran Church (ELCA), Centerville, Iowa."

accentuated by being Black as well.

“Well, being Black is a good practice for being self-affirming in the face of homophobia because when you have to deal with the police and all kinds of people making judgements about you on the basis of your skin color and you think, “You know, I could do the same thing with my sexuality.”<sup>186</sup>

In a different interview question’s context, the Rev. Kevin Strickland referred to his need for supporting and clarifying connections with friends, colleagues, and his spouse. These statements and considerations exemplify the need for an introductory and orientation process, such as the plan for “7 Monthly Meetups,” to support the success of the arrival process.

5. Arrival scenarios reflect context: From answers to Question 4, about communicating arrival, the scenarios noted by the interviewees varied slightly by locations. This was mostly due to local customs. The majority of their introductory routines seemed ordinary—likened to when any new pastor arrives to begin work. Fitting into established routines was helpful to calm initial anxieties on the parts of both pastor and congregation. Typically, the arrival announcement scenarios depended on the demographics, expectations, and practices of the congregations. Questions 2 and 3 relayed the risks and rewards interviewees felt toward coming to the new place and their feelings on the first day. Arrival considerations varied, and the variety of attitudes about how to welcome the gay pastor ran the gamut from “don’t focus on it” to “celebrate it.” The differences were distinct, reflecting the diversity of thinking in the LGBTQ

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<sup>186</sup> Buford, “Video Interview with the Rev. Ron Buford, Congregational Church of Sunnyvale - UCC, Sunnyvale, California.”

community. The Rev. Joe Amico, answering Question 20, championed the former:

You know what? I think the number one advice I'd have is lay off the gay stuff. Don't make that the issue. This is your pastor. What is it that this pastor has, that you called them to be your pastor? You didn't call them because they're an openly gay pastor. You called them because of the skills they have as a pastor. And talk about those issues, and don't dwell on the gay issues.

The Rev. Greg Davis, answering Question 20, said he was more inclined to focus on the positive effect having a gay pastor may bring:

I think any church that has come to a place where they can celebrate and take a breath that they called a gay pastor, they have something special to share with the community, to be able to accept that pastor and let the stories of his life or her life be their stories. I think when things are announced that a gay pastor is arriving, that all of a sudden, it doesn't become a personal story, that the specific things about my life that I want to share with you that happened to me because I'm gay or might relate to scripture, let it be my story.<sup>187</sup>

On the Question 18 topic, the Rev. Jeremy McElvain offered a simple request:

My hope for a congregation when they are looking to call a gay pastor or are in the early days of having called a gay pastor, is that they would be open and welcoming. That they would at least take the opportunity to speak to that new pastor as a human being. That they don't think of them as some weird thing from outer space.<sup>188</sup>

The Rev. C. Dale Jackson noted that whether they be emanating from internalized homophobia or social conditioning, or professional caution, concerns remain on the part

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<sup>187</sup> Davis, "Video Interview with the Rev. Greg Davis, In Search Process, Referencing Role as Immediate Past Pastor, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, Nevada."

<sup>188</sup> McElvain, "Video Interview with the Rev. Jeremy McElvain, First Lutheran Church (ELCA), Centerville, Iowa."

of the gay pastor about being openly gay:

For me, a risk was having the potential that my ministry would become defined by my sexuality, which was something that I never really wanted to happen. I am a minister who is gay. I don't want to be the gay minister with that perceived baggage, I guess, that comes along with that.<sup>189</sup>

One concern I developed during the interviews was based on hearing a couple of the pastors speak of their quest to be appreciated as a *pastor*, rather than a gay pastor. While I understand and respect the sentiment, such diminishment of the latter identity fails to remember the gifts they bring and the hopes of the congregation when they were hired. In the course of the interviews, I did not challenge in real time nor edit later any respondents' words. Based on my experience with gay male professionals, and hearing the testimony of other interviewees, that position was not surprising. I've heard similar comments from gay men in other professions.

This may be residual internalized homophobia still activating its formula. Instead of repressing one's gay identity in the pastor's role, it is reported that when someone is authentically themselves, even as gay men, people of integrity will appreciate their wholeness. The Rev. Bill Ingraham noted as much in his interview when responding in part to Questions 11 and 12, about disappointments in his first six months on the job in his current location:

I had a woman confront me one day. She did it in the best possible way. It was a time when there weren't other people in the same room with us, but there was someone in the building. She pulled me aside and said, "There's something I need to tell you. I'm really concerned. This has to do with you being a gay pastor," and

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<sup>189</sup> Jackson, "Video Interview with the Rev. C. Dale Jackson, Riverside Presbyterian Church, Riverside, Illinois."

I was totally ready for her to, I don't know, hit me with a bat. That says more about my background maybe than I wanna share. I was scared. My heart stopped. I broke out in a sweat. What she said flabbergasted me. She said, "We've been an open and affirming congregation a long time. Our pastors have long talked about LGBT issues," well it was just lesbian and gay at that point, "lesbian and gay issues, had been in favor of LGBT people and working against homophobia. You don't mention it at all. Here we hired a gay pastor. We thought you'd at least talk about it once in a while in your sermons. When are you gonna start talking about it in your sermon? This church needs to be challenged. We need to be aware of the issues and you're the perfect person to do it because you're a gay man who's a minister. We need you to be stepping up to the plate." You could have knocked me over with a feather.<sup>190</sup>

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones offered global advice to a church and pastor in the new situation. His thoughts may be used as an overall conclusion for what will help ensure that the new pastor sticks his landing and the church's new covenant relationship works.

As the person arrives, do all the things you would to welcome any pastor and their family: Take them to dinner, have them to lunch, throw parties, get to know them and provide the care and support and the willingness to try new things that all pastors are entitled to when they start any new call. Same as my advice to the minister, if you choose to be radically inclusive and welcoming, then it will work, and then it doesn't become an issue.

6. Latent homophobia is an active presence: Which means, whether internalized or institutionalized, many gay pastors remain fearful that their sexual orientation will prevent them from getting interviews. In at least two cases, the gay pastor kept sexual orientation out of career profiles until being scheduled to meet with a hiring committee. They felt inherent resistance to a gay pastor being hired by a congregation was still too strong to trust the official process with their full identity.

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<sup>190</sup> Ingraham, "Video Interview with the Rev. William H. Ingraham, First Church Congregational UCC, Methuen, Massachusetts."

Both pastors did not remain hidden, though. They revealed their sexual orientation at their first meeting with the search committees. In these cases, they were eventually hired and related announcements noted their sexual orientation directly, or assumptively, by welcoming spouses and partners. This reveals a fundamental flaw in the systems. Official search and call processes tend to treat LGBTQ persons differently from heterosexuals. Due to heteronormative bias in place straight pastors do not have to reveal their sexual orientation when applying for jobs. Heterosexism covers them. Brett Webb-Mitchell noted this bias in his 2018 blog post:

LGBTQ (clergy) will need to redirect the energy we expended in living closeted lives of dread to break down barriers of hate, walking a pilgrimage of hope in responding to the call of God. To live in our ministry with integrity and love is truly a gift of grace. Coming generations will talk of the closet as an anecdote, best left in history's rubbish bin. Out-LGBTQ clergy look forward to serving others as we preach, celebrate the sacraments, join in service projects, coordinate educational activities, participate in fellowship opportunities as we take our place and use our gifts as members of the holy, mysterious and inclusive body of Christ.<sup>191</sup>

As presented in Chapter Two, when gay pastors encounter community-based, external homophobia, it will be more due to experience than to education that they will be able to reduce the negative presence. Internalized homophobia is a challenge each of the gay pastors must try to overcome with inner work and quality relationships.

7. Intra-church advocacy groups are marginally helpful: Several church-based groups were modest sources of research and videos. However, one stood out. Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries ([www.elm.org](http://www.elm.org)) was the leader in providing adaptable

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<sup>191</sup> Webb-Mitchell, "Out and Ordained | HuffPost."

and transferable resources to make the covenant work between a gay pastor and the new congregation. Their degree of detail and care offered great value to congregations and pastors. Their materials would be of great service to any other denominational search and call process. As more denominations align in ecclesial cooperation and full communion, it is an easy adjustment to apply these resources in local church settings across denominational boundaries.

8. Outreach is a benefit: Welcoming a gay pastor may help open the congregation to the surrounding community in a renewed identity. When a church decides to see the new gay pastor as an opportunity to open up to the community with announcements of the leadership change, the ministry and mission may grow in exciting ways. In his interview questions about community outreach, the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström talked about his congregation being happy and confident in their decision to welcome him, even as they were located in a nationally known, conservative county. The congregation decided that to be welcoming to their new gay pastor provided reassurance to community and extended family members that “this church was a safe place to be one’s whole self.”<sup>192</sup>

For congregations to remain vital and growing, outreach is essential. In an analysis of trends for persons reaching their 40s and regarding their attitudes toward churches, Emily Fetch reported: “Seven-in-ten (70 percent) Millennials believe that religious groups are alienating young adults by being too judgmental about gay and

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<sup>192</sup> Tellström, “Video Interview with the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström, Irvine United Congregational Church (UCC), Irvine, California.”

lesbian issues.”<sup>193</sup> Since Merriam-Webster.com defines Millennials (sic) as persons born in the years between 1980 and 2000, it would appear that successful church outreach to millennial Americans means that attitudes toward LGBTQ issues need to be made positive. Hiring a gay pastor could provide the start toward good outcomes.

9. Working the system is helpful: Remember that in order to get job interviews, the Rev. Peter Johnston built a self-promoting website. Also, based on his decade of service in various ministry roles, he leveraged the relationships he enjoyed with other people in his area. Greg went around the system by making networking phone calls in the area he wanted to live. Dale was widely known due to his presence in denominational activities, so some congregants already knew him and reached out to him. These are examples of how three of the pastors interviewed used their wits, skill, and connections to advocate for themselves. Such groundwork before the first interview, prepared well for their arrival and initial months.

10. Technology is a fickle muse: The most challenging aspect of this D/P was my struggle with the technologies for the video interviews, the digital video file management, and organizing the transcriptions. The evolution from what I thought I could do—and agreed to do in the design/scope document—to what I did in order accomplish the goals was daunting and sometimes painful. Yet the interview interactions, with the value the cumulative insights offered, made the process worthwhile. When the website went live,

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<sup>193</sup> Emily Fetsch, “Are Millennials Leaving Religion Over LGBT Issues?” PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), *Spotlight Analysis*, March 13, 2014, accessed August 9, 2018, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/leaving-religion-lgbt-issues/>.

past difficulties were almost forgotten. When doctoral candidates design a D/P that includes digital components, they should be very clear on the skills needed, personnel required, logistics involved, and financial commitment necessary.

Based on the responses at the time of writing this chapter, changes have been made as described in Chapter Three. Due to local proximity and business connections, the web developer for this project has agreed to be available as needed for updates and adjustments. That being said, the project is established for now and will remain active according to its usefulness.

The impact of this D/P on the church is already felt as the interviewees knew they were helping others by telling their stories and offering their experience-based wisdom. The resources included are available to anyone who wants to sample them and learn from them. It may be reassuring to everyone who visits the website and/or reads this paper that what is offered is honest, affirming, and helpful. The work on this project spanning two-plus years, has been transformational for me; as I saw my idea become a reality—in both the physical and digital realms. In so doing, the presence of God’s ministry is recognized in dimensions once not even dreamed of. The noble purpose of this project was to innovate a common process, use a new method to teach a good lesson, and benefit the Body of Christ with good leaders on solid grounds. So be it.

## Epilogue

As Bill Johnson was preparing for his 1972 official church examination prior to ordination, he sat for an interview and expressed his perspective on the considerations within the Body of Christ. In the short documentary film made to communicate the details and ramifications of the historic day's action, he reflected on the theological context of the pending vote of yea or nay to his pastoral call: "Human beings will find themselves in the predicament of taking a position of faith or taking a position of fear and I have great faith that, when it comes right down to taking a position, that Christian men and women will make the faith position their own."<sup>194</sup>

Welcoming a gay pastor for the first time in the life of any congregation is taking a position of faith rather than fear. This D/P will help more congregations welcome gay pastors, with confidence in the Christian mission of loving God and one another, while also encouraging gay pastors to no longer hide their sexual orientation out of fear that they are disadvantaged in the hiring process. The authenticity for gay pastors and congregations that comes with being honest, transparent, and loving will be a strong witness enabling growth for all involved.

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<sup>194</sup> Mike Rhodes, *The United Church of Christ, A Position of Faith*.

## **Appendix A**

### **YouTube Site Introduction Video Script**

Hello there. My name is Kevin Johnson and I want to welcome you to This Gay Pastor Welcome YouTube channel. This is part of my dissertation project associated with the Doctor of Ministry degree that I'm pursuing as a part of the Advanced Pastoral Studies Program at San Francisco Theological Seminary. This project is aimed at helping congregations welcome gay pastors into parish ministry. Research and experience show that even though openly gay pastors are not widely hired, their leadership can be very positive for congregations. With the ordination of more and more gay pastors in major denominations, there is a need to help congregations be more open to their leadership and the benefits of that leadership that will come to the local church.

So, this project wants to lower the cultural barriers to hiring gay pastors. Hopefully this will make it easier for more covenants between local churches and gay pastors and to be able to make those covenants get off to a healthy start. One of the phrases I've used a few times is I want to help these new pastors; I want to help them make their landings stick. A good beginning will be the basis of success as they work toward their mission together. Because this is an academic project, I had to limit the scope.

What you'll find here is that I interviewed 12 out of the closet gay men who are fully functioning as adult church professionals and they are persons with their clergy credentials in good standing. In most of the interviews, these are persons who are hired by churches who are not LGBTQ demographically dependent. In the cases of active clergy, they were the first gay pastors hired by the churches that they are now serving or

served at the time. Of course, the insight and experiences of these men may be applied in some cases to openly lesbian, bi, and transgender clergy being hired by a local church for the first time.

This YouTube channel has more than 150 original video interview clips and it also has going with each of the clips, a transcript for each of the interviews. Each of the pastors interviewed gave answers to up to 20 questions. The clips are organized into playlists, one for each pastor and one for each question. Plus, there's a playlist of several subject related videos that I thought would be interesting to this specific topic and so I decided to include them. As time goes on I may add some more of these as I discover those, and that's one of the beauties of this kind of a website.

I encourage you to bounce around throughout the playlists and among the pastors that are here as well as through the other resources. This is an organized channel, but it isn't meant to be used in a linear fashion. You're able to pick and choose among the pastors and the questions that you're interested in and this way in the parlance of web surfing, you can snack throughout the website and figure out what it is that you want to benefit from most.

In addition to this channel, there's a website, [gaypastorwelcome.org](http://gaypastorwelcome.org) that offers more information in a written fashion and organizes things a little bit differently. This includes a simple plan for monthly group meetings to support the newly hired gay pastor's arrival and in developing early relationships with the congregation. Groups in your local situation, in your local context can adapt the meetings to suit your own situations. The purpose of these interviews and the other information is to facilitate a

socially unhindered arrival, and it's also meant to demystify some of the intrinsic and negative cultural assumptions pertaining to homosexuals.

I hope you are blessed by the use of these resources on these channels and on the other website. They're intended for the good use of all. Through this project I am hoping that some gay pastors stick their landing as they arrive in their new jobs.

**Appendix B**

**D/P Video Interview Disclosure and Informed Consent Form**

(Privacy consideration: Samples provided here. Originals held on file.)

My name is **Kevin A. Johnson**.

I am a Doctor of Ministry student at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Here is my contact information: Mobile: 760-992-4346;

Email: kaj090999@hotmail.com

This video interview is a part of my doctoral work’s dissertation project (D/P). It was developed on the basis of my reading and research in the related subject areas. The title of D/P is:

**“Making the Covenant Work: A Web-based Resource for Welcoming Gay Pastors.”**

You are invited to participate in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary.

Any self-disclosure is voluntary. As this project involves interviews, you are free to not answer specific questions, to terminate an interview, or to completely withdraw from the project at any time. Confidentiality and collegiality are important. I do not want you to violate any confidences or reflect poorly on other persons. You are welcome to redirect any questions that cause you discomfort. Your care is my concern and I am committed to this being a good experience for all involved.

I will make every effort to maintain your privacy. Any information you share in the context of this program will be held in the strictest confidence will be honored for its context. If you feel, after this video interview, that you are not be able to trust this D/P process, you are free to withdraw from the project and rescind your signature to this permission document.

If you have any other questions about this project, please ask me directly. If you have questions for my advisor, that person’s name and contact information are as follows: Rev. Dr. Sharon R. Graff; Mobile: 909-528-6810; Email: Sharon.rae.graff@gmail.com

By signing your name below, you are indicating that you have read and understood this disclosure statement and are voluntarily agreeing to participate in the project. You may request a copy of this signed statement.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of DMin Student

Date

## Appendix C

### D/P Video Release Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby grant permission to **Kevin A. Johnson** the rights of my image, in video or still, and of the likeness and sound of my voice as recorded on audio or video tape without payment or any other consideration. I understand that my image may be edited, copied, exhibited, published, or distributed, and waive the right to inspect or approve the finished product wherein my likeness appears. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising or related to the use of my image or recording. I also understand that this material may be used in diverse educational, church, and commercial settings within an unrestricted geographic area.

Photographic, audio, or video recordings may be used for ANY USE which may include but is not limited to: Presentations; Courses; Online/Internet Videos; Media; News (Press);

By signing this release, I understand this permission signifies that photographic or video recordings of me may be electronically displayed via the Internet or in public, church, and educational settings.

I will be consulted about the use of the photographs or video recording for any purpose other than those listed above.

There is no time limit on the validity of this release nor is there any geographic limitation on where these materials may be distributed.

This release applies to photographic, audio or video recordings collected as part of the sessions listed on this document only.

By signing this release, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to be bound thereby. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material for educational purposes.

Full Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address/P.O. Box \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Video Interview 20 Questions

1. Please tell your name, credentials, years of service, and brief pastoral history.
2. What did you consider the risks and rewards of being the first openly gay pastor to serve this church? How did you process those?
3. Describe the feelings you had on your first Sunday there.
4. How did you communicate your arrival into the community – the local congregation and the surrounding areas?
5. Describe your feelings and cumulative findings at the end of the first six months of your pastorate.
6. What surprises did you encounter?
7. Describe any disappointments you encountered.
8. Tell us how your calling is in alignment with your personal identity.
9. Describe any measures you took to check for intrinsic or obvious feelings of staff and congregants relating to your being an out gay pastor.
10. If there are staff, describe the sense you got from the staff upon your arrival.
11. Describe the first time you perceived that someone might be reacting poorly to your being a gay pastor.
12. How did you respond? Describe any church response that came into the situation.
13. Describe situations of an opposite reaction.
14. Describe aspects of being a man that you thought might come into play in the new location.
15. How did those aspects play out upon your arrival and settling in?
16. How do you keep a solid identity in the face of homophobia and internalized homophobia?
17. How do you keep a solid, self-affirming identity in response to community homophobia and internalized homophobia?
18. Tell us what you hope a congregation would do to welcome and respond to an arriving out-gay pastor.
19. What advice would you give a gay pastor approaching a new church job?
20. What advice for a good beginning would you give a church receiving a newly hired gay pastor for the first time?

## Appendix E

### 7 Monthly Meetups Plan

#### i. Preparation

**Overview:** These once-a-month sessions are adaptable depending on each congregational context. Smaller congregations may have one or two groups. Larger congregations may schedule more. Whether weekdays, evenings, or weekends, it is best to suit the scheduling most conducive to the demographics and culture of the congregation. For group process integrity and best results, it is important that participants covenant to attend all seven meetups.

**Lay leadership** is encouraged. Except for the first meeting one month before the new pastor's arrival, all meetings **must include the pastor's presence**, as this will diminish relational communication triangles. (reference family systems theory).

**Group structure and size:** Since this is an intentional small group to monitor and give feedback to benefit the covenantal relationship, keep it representational at the trusted leadership level of the congregation. The officers and pastor parish representative plus two or three members, up to a group of eight, in addition to the pastor, would work well. The pastor and a lay person agree to share leadership of the group equally. For wider information gathering and sharing, offer a congregation meeting in the first month to welcome the pastor and in the sixth month to celebrate and report accomplishments.

**Goals of each Meet-up:** 1) Build a trusting relationship with the new pastor; 2) Establish and address concerns and problems on the minds of group members; 3) Celebrate joys and accomplishments; 4) Learn and apply covenant supporting concepts and practices offered by the discussion topic(s).

**Note:** From the start of the gay new pastor's tenure, give no credence to anonymous comments. Referring to they, them, someone, and people registering comments is another form of triangles (reference [A Time for Burning](#) film). If someone has something to report, a person's name must be associated with the matter and addressed individually, honestly, and carefully in person.

**Schedule** the meetups for at least 60 and not more than 90 minutes. Start on time and end on time. Allow enough time for everyone to participate thoughtfully in a safe and unrushed environment. Ensure access to Internet-based video resources.

#### **Begin each meeting by:**

1. Briefly defining the safety and integrity of the group members and dynamics.
2. Giving up to 10 minutes of check-in time for group members to identify themselves.
3. Asking group members to say in 30 seconds or less what they hope to receive/achieve from the meeting.
4. Recording the hopes so all can see and track them.

**Values Invocation:** Every meeting, begin and end the time with a moment of prayer/meditation – spoken, silent, or both – according to the theological/spiritual context of the congregation. Guide discussion so the agenda is honored, and all are heard from.

## **ii. 7 Monthly Meetups Plans and Discussion Topics**

### **1. One Month Prior to Start Date: “Plan for Success”**

- A. Brainstorm how to communicate the new pastor’s arrival to the congregation and the community.
- B. Review and evaluate feedback from candidating weekend, if there was one.
- C. Watch the Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM) video, [Enrich & Inform](#), as a source of missional assurance and welcoming resources. Visit the website to gain information. Visit the [ELM website](#).
- D. Check for and note signs of homophobia and heterosexism in the congregation and community.
- E. Establish a simple strategy to deal with “Gays Against Religion” in case that meme arises.
- F. List relationships in the congregation and community that will be most important to establish and grow in the first six months.
- G. Establish one volunteer to work with the new pastor as local church organizational guide and consultant in matters of bylaws and intrinsic culture.
- H. Establish two volunteers to be local community liaisons to orient new pastor to the area customs and local businesses.
- I. Encourage group members to visit [gaypastorwelcome.com](#) to see and hear the insights and experiences of the 12 gay pastors interviewed.
- J. Open discussion.

### **2. First Month (preferably within the week after the first onboard Sunday): “Get Acquainted”**

- A. Welcome and affirm the new pastor with personal stories of ‘What it means to me’ to have you here.
- B. Allow the new pastor to express feelings and dreams for ministry with the congregation.
- C. Celebrate and review the first Sunday.
- D. Review plan for the next six meetings.
- E. Establish plan for offering and promoting a public service of installation and community welcome.
- F. Establish an understanding of organizational polarities as they apply to the congregation and monitor them throughout the meet-ups process.
- G. Clarify and communicate missional and marketing messages to reflect the new normal being experienced.

**3. Second Month: “Interfaith and Judicatory Relationships”**

- A. Establish plan to be visibly present and connect with the local and denominational communities.
- B. Orient new pastor to local interfaith colleagues and arrange to make introductions.
- C. Connect pastor to existing judicatory relationships.
- D. Brainstorm at least three communication channels for the pastor to foster the relationship with the congregation through updates and reports of professional goals and ministry accomplishments.
- E. Commit one or two volunteers to help new pastor establish methods of communication. Aim for at least one to be brand new to the congregation, e.g., social networking or electronic newsletters.
- F. For next month, ask the members of the group to watch at least three of the resource videos on the "[Resources](#)" page. Ask for feedback during the check-in time.

**4. Third Month: “How Goes it Congregationally?”**

- A. Ask people to note what three resource videos they watched and give their impressions.
- B. List connections and disconnections of the videos themes for this ministry context.
- C. Recheck for signs of homophobia and heterosexism.
- D. Consider **adjusting** your church operations budget or pastor’s work schedule to be more supportive to the pastor as he gets settled and develops a clearer sense of his professional role, interests, and vision.
- E. Watch the [Friedman’s Theory of Differentiated Leadership Made Simple](#) video.
- F. Ask people to envision themselves in the various roles.
- G. Discuss how the video can apply to the arrival of a gay pastor in this community.
- H. List the key points to reference when receiving the anxious expressions of congregation and community members.
- I. Recommit to communication standards that respect professional boundaries and discount anonymous comments.

**5. Fourth Month: “Movie Night”**

- A. Allow one hour to watch [A Time for Burning](#) either online or purchase the DVD.
- B. Compare and contrast the congregational dynamics between the White and Black congregations.
- C. Discuss the differences in points made by the Black youth group members.
- D. Using last month’s discussion about family systems theory and differentiated leadership, discuss how anonymous comments referenced by congregants in Omaha played the negative role of an unchecked third person/group, setting up a triangle between the favorable and unfavorable factions.
- E. Apply discussion points to this ministry context. Offer to allow more time for this discussion this meeting if the group desires it.
- F. Ask the group for one or two of the topics not yet discussed that they would like to cover. Evaluate the requests and plan to cover the topics as possible.

**6. Fifth Month: “How are we Doing?”**

- A. Prior to the meeting, ask group members to read the thesis entitled: *[Openly Gay and Lesbian Pastors Called by Predominantly Straight UCC Congregations](#)*.
- B. Ascertain feelings of congregation by asking group members to report “joys and concerns” they’ve heard from identifiable individuals in the church and community. Determine response strategies that avoid triangles. Communicate follow-up actions in person or via church communication channels.
- C. This is a time to do a first reading of data points for measuring success. Check basic data of attendance, offerings, and Sunday morning first-time visitors. Do not celebrate or panic too soon. Use data to discuss/plan needed changes.
- D. Affirm the pastor’s ministry in the early days. Review his sense of accomplishment and vision for coming months.
- E. Establish a list of five ways to support the new pastor.

**7. Sixth Month: “Celebrate and Reflect”**

- A. List and celebrate all successes. Share some good food. Have some fun with this one.
- B. Discuss how a public declaration of welcome would affirm the congregation’s mission and ministry.
- C. If the congregation has not affiliated with a welcoming advocacy group in the denomination, set up a taskforce to investigate the process of achieving public welcome.
- D. Consider any lingering disappointments. Establish a small group to deal with and alleviate those and promote the reassurance to move on.
- E. If there is not a pastor-parish relations committee, establish one to support the mutual covenant between the pastor and the congregation while monitoring the call agreement/hiring contract/professional goal setting. If one exists, make sure it is a supportive group with a clear idea of the covenantal mission and ministry goals.
- F. Spend the final 15 minutes minimum to affirm the ministry of the new pastor and create a to-do list for ongoing covenantal success.
- G. This is the last meeting of this group.

**iii. Supporting Resources**

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## Appendix F

### Feedback Form

This website is the major portion of my San Francisco Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry dissertation project (DP) entitled: Making the Covenant Work: A Web-based Resource for Welcoming Gay Pastors

I am requesting your voluntary feedback with your permission to include remarks in the paper. By filling out this form, you grant me permission to record your feedback and comments in the DP and other papers or publications at my discretion. Comments will be included verbatim.

Thank you.

As you visit: [www.gaypastorwelcome.com](http://www.gaypastorwelcome.com), please view the introductory video and proceed as directed. Then respond to these statements using the scale and provide narrative comments.

(\* indicates required field.)

A. Please tell us your church role and why you came to visit/use this website. You may remain anonymous. If you wish to identify yourself and contact us, please click on the "Contact" button.

Comments\*

B. Provide feedback on ease of navigation and use.

Scale\*

- 4 - Great
- 3 - Good
- 2 - Bad
- 1 - Sucks

Comments

C. Provide feedback on content of interviews and resources.

Scale\*

- 4 - Great
- 3 - Good
- 2 - Bad
- 1 - Sucks

Comments

D. Provide feedback on use and content of Seven (7) Month Plan.

Scale\*

- 4 - Great
- 3 - Good
- 2 - Bad
- 1 - Sucks

Comments

E. In what way(s) is this valuable to you? Name any ways you may use this in your work.

Comments\*

CAPTCHA

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