

## **ABSTRACT**

SANDERS, TSHARRE RAHEL. "I Won't Let Go": Holding on to Faith as a Black LGBTQ Christian. (Under the direction of Dr. Annie Hardison-Moody and Dr. Maru Gonzalez).

Although there seems to be a growing acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer (LGBQ), or same-gender-loving (SGL) identities within some Christian denominations, many Black LGBQ/SGL Christians are still receiving messages condemning their identities through involvement in more conservative Protestant Christian communities. For many, this is a source of discomfort and tension which can force them to disengage or otherwise change how they engage with their faith practices. Through 11 in-depth interviews with Black LGBQ Christians analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological approach, I will explore how the participants make sense of faith and the impact that has on their sense of self. The paper also explores the effects of this intersection of identity on self-esteem and faith. Participants demonstrated that their identity formation was a relational endeavor and included relationships to themselves, others, religion, and God. The results suggest a need for a shift in Black Christian families and networks to offer more social support for their LGBQ congregants/members. The study ends with implications for family, church, and future research.

© Copyright 2021 by Tsharre Rahel Sanders

All Rights Reserved

“I Won’t Let Go”: Holding on to Faith as a Black LGBTQ Christian

by  
Tsharre Sanders

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

Youth, Family, and Community Sciences

Raleigh, North Carolina  
2020

APPROVED BY:

---

Dr. Annie Hardison-Moody  
Committee Co-Chair

---

Dr. Maru Gonzalez  
Committee Co-Chair

---

Dr. Kim Stansbury

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all Black LGBTQ Christian people who may have endured harm at the hands of the people who we are told by society will love us the most, our families. It is dedicated to those of us who were taught by our families to love the church. It is dedicated to those of us who love the church although some of its teachings have left us spiritually disenfranchised. I will try my best to honor the rich history and tradition of the Black church, and will give myself grace where I am not able to do so as well as I may want to. I will take pride in the fact that I have done and will continue to do my best concerning LGBTQ acceptance within the Black church. There is so much nuance, and I will admit there are some who are getting it right in terms of treating our neighbors well, but far and wide, the norm is to treat this group as “other” and be exclusionary. My vision with this paper is to, again, honor the Black church - an institution I love very much thanks to House of Prayer, Inc. of Johnston County, NC (Selma, Kenly, Clayton) and also honor and aide in bringing justice to a community I have a huge passion for - the Black LGBTQ youth who will come in contact with this institution.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Tsharre (sharre) Sanders is a Black queer femme who believes in God. sharre is the child of Angel George and Ralph Sanders of Johnston County, North Carolina. She is passionate about youth and believe they are truly our future which is why she is a youth-serving professional. She enjoys learning and this research project has inspired her to continue to learn and advocate for Black queer Christian people.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank God for grace and I thank God for mercy. I am so grateful for the heart to do this work, for the call on my life; for my purpose. I am grateful to God for what once was a thorn in my side, that I now get to see as a gift from the Divine to help reconcile his children back to God. I am grateful for my advisors for their challenging, supporting, and encouraging me through this research process. I am grateful for my friends and family who also challenged and encouraged me throughout my time writing this paper. I also want to thank myself for the courage to finish this project and for believing in me enough to see it through.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	iv
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	3
Homonegativity in Black Christian Communities .....	3
Impact of Religion on Black Families.....	4
Impact of Religion on Sexual Minorities .....	6
Negotiating Spiritual Identity and Sexual Orientation .....	8
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	11
Positionality.....	13
Participant Recruitment and Selection .....	14
Data Collection.....	14
Data Analysis .....	16
Trustworthiness .....	17
Limitations.....	17
<b>RESULTS</b> .....	18
Relationship to Self.....	19
Relationship to Others .....	24
Relationship to Religion.....	32
Relationship to God.....	38
<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	41
The Interplay of Relationship to Religion and to Self.....	41
Understanding the Relationship to Others, Self, and Religion.....	45
Understanding the Relationship to Self and God .....	51
Implications .....	52
Limitations.....	53
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	53
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	56
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	61
Appendix A: Recruitment Email.....	62
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form.....	63
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide .....	66
Appendix D: Codebook.....	68

**LIST OF TABLES**

<b>Table 1</b>	Participant Demographic Information .....	16
<b>Table 2</b>	Superordinate themes and their subthemes .....	18

## INTRODUCTION

According to the National Survey of Black Americans, 76% of respondents said the Black church was an important part of their childhood socialization (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). In the United States about 48% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) people identify as members of a Christian faith with 5% of those respondents belonging to historically Black protestant faith groups (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Black church, which is sometimes referred to as the mother of Black culture by many scholars of Black religion, is an institution that has been and continues to be integral in shaping the lives of many Black people especially since it serves as a source of support for the Black family (Allen, 2019; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; DuBois, 1995; Lincoln, 1989). Given the historical and present-day significance of the Black church, it is important for it to be a source of hope and social change to all the people it serves including Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals.

At present, the Black church is the opposite of a source of hope for this population; it perpetuates harm toward its' LGBQ congregants by negative teaching and attitudes toward LGBQ people (Douglas, 1999; Lightsey, 2015; Ward, 2005). According to Teresa Pasquale (2015), "sexual identity negation is another powerfully painful way unhealthy or abusive religious communities and religious doctrine can negate and devalue a person based on who they are as a human being" (p. 109). The purpose of this study was to understand the complexities of maintaining a faith system for Black LGBQ individuals who were raised in non-affirming families. I explored the impact of the intersections of sexual orientation and religion on participants' sense of self and identity. The study drew on the lived experiences of Black LGBQ people in order to better understand the messages they often hear growing up, the process of meaning-making concerning their faith systems, and how that process impacts self-esteem. Due

to the paucity in literature on Black LGBTQ Christians' process of religious meaning-making, I aimed to give voice to a marginalized community whose often traumatic experiences with their sexual orientation and spiritual identity impact their spiritual trajectory and development.

It is important to clearly define faith in this context to understand how this study was able to answer the research questions. James Fowler (1981) defined faith as “a generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning” (p. 55); Fowler asserted that meaning did not have to be found via religion. However, since I inquired about how Black LGBTQ Christians, a religious group, understand their faith, it is also important to understand how religion can be viewed as a meaning system (Silberman, 2005). When I posed this question, I did so from the assumption that religion is one avenue by which individuals search for meaning; Silberman (2005) affirmed this sentiment and asserted that understanding religion as a meaning system can also lead to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between religion and individual and societal well-being.

The literature reviewed provides an overview of the pervasive homonegativity—or simply put, negative attitudes toward the LGBTQ community—in Black Christian spaces and discusses the importance of religion for Black families. It also examines the ways in which LGBTQ Christian people are harmed by negative religious rhetoric and how they navigate or negotiate their sexual orientation and spiritual development when that harm is inflicted upon them. The literature review is followed by a methods section where I detail the research and data analysis processes. I found that the ways the participants made meaning of faith was dependent upon their relationships. After sharing the results, I discuss how my findings align with, diverge from, and expand upon the literature reviewed and previous studies conducted with Black LGBTQ

Christians. I conclude with implications for the Black family, Black church, and for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Homonegativity in Black Christian Communities**

According to Ward (2005) and theologians Pamela Lightsey (2015) and Kelly Brown Douglas (1999), many Black churches contribute to the amount of homophobia pervading Black communities. Although there are multiple views on whether and how to welcome and/or affirm LGBTQ Christians in Christian congregations, a more prevalent stance among Black Christians is that being a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) community is a “sinful choice,” which means that any non-heterosexual orientation can and should be changed in order to rid oneself of sin (Moon, 2014). Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, and Young (2016) conducted a study to examine how Black pastors’ views on same-sex attraction influences HIV prevention work in their churches. The authors found that many of the pastors involved in the study had negative attitudes when it came to people who identified as members of the LGBQ community and most of the pastors viewed LGBQ identities as a choice. The authors stated that by understanding homosexuality as a choice rather than an identity, the pastors were able to justify their stances as truth due to 1) the pastors’ role as a messenger for God and 2) the nature of how they interpret scriptures that seem to condemn homosexuality (Quinn, et al., 2016).

In addition to contributing to homonegative attitudes by explicitly preaching against LGBQ people, Black LGBQ congregants are also often rendered invisible when their churches employ “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentalities and make sexuality taboo (Chaney & Patrick, 2011; Coleman, 2008; Quinn, et al., 2016; Moon, 2014). Chaney & Patrick (2011) focused their study on one Black megachurch. This case study exemplified how Black LGBQ individuals are erased

when the minister neglects to preach or share feelings about the LGBTQ population during interviews and sermons. While the church from their study was meeting physical needs, such as testing for HIV/AIDS and providing material support, the pastor's statement that members "shouldn't inquire about how they got it" (p. 210) illustrated the pastors' ignorance toward a psychological and emotional need for their LGBTQ congregants. Ultimately, the authors asserted that Black churches can do a better job at meeting the needs of their LGBTQ congregants.

By reviewing the work of theologians and other scholars who have studied the intersection of religion and sexual orientation, the prevalence of negative messages concerning the Black LGBTQ population in Black churches and communities is made evident. For the most part, there is either a misunderstanding or an erasure of sexual and gender diversity in Black Christian communities. My study asked participants about the messages they received from their churches while they were growing up in order to understand their personal experiences, and whether they align or diverge from the research cited here.

### **The Impact of Religion on Black Families**

Black people are the most religious ethnic group in the United States (Masci et al., 2018), so it is important to understand the impact the aforementioned messages about sexuality can have on Black individuals and their families. Many "strong, marriage based Black Christian families" (p. 673) rely on prayer and religious faith to sustain their family unit in the areas of marriage, parenting, and life in general according to Millett, et al. (2018). They used in-depth interviews to show the ways in which religious faith is able to provide mental and physical health benefits as well as higher quality marital and parental relationships for Black Christian families. The participants in this study detailed how their faith served as a source of cohesion for their family and how their love for God taught them how to love themselves and one another well.

Although religious faith is a source of sustenance and strength for many Black families, what could happen when the religious beliefs and adherence to those beliefs may be the reason Black LGBTQ individuals are not able to safely disclose their sexual orientation or otherwise have a sense of authenticity with their families? Pastrana (2016) discovered that family acceptance was the most powerful predictor of outness for Black LGBTQ people by conducting a national study. The study indicated that families are an important part of Black LGBTQ peoples' self-actualization concerning their sexual orientation. However, because of religious teaching, some Black LGBTQ people may not be able to receive familial acceptance. Goodrich and Trahan (2015) conducted a study to examine the consequences of coming out, or disclosing LGBTQ sexual identity, in Black families. They found that coming out in a Black family was influenced by affiliation with African American Baptist churches. The participants in their study cited their affiliation with their denomination as the reason they either delayed coming out or felt as if they should adopt a heterosexual identity. Henry (2013) found that for the participants in her study, outness in LGBTQ people was important for their self-esteem and contributed to lower levels of depression. Concerning authenticity, Riggle, et al. (2016) found that for participants in their study, higher levels of authenticity related to sexual orientation led to better psychological outcomes. When it comes to sexual minorities in these religious families, their religion which is source of strength for the family could also become a source of stress for the LGBTQ individuals in those families.

To that end, Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) developed a model of dualities between religion and family to exemplify how religion has the potential to be helpful or harmful to families. There are eight elements of this model, which are grouped into four dimensions: (A) Spiritual and Religious Experiences, (B) Personal Choices and Consequences, (C) Family

Relational Dynamics, and (D) Meaning and Change. The two that are most relevant in the context of this study are dimensions B and C. In Dimension B, element three the authors explain that “religion in families may involve refusing certain actions” which means families may refuse to certain ideas and influences into family life if they are considered profane (Dollahite, et. al., 2018, p. 226). Dimension C, element 5a states that religion in families may cause struggles which are defined in the article as “relational burdens, disunities, abuses, and offenses associated with devout belief and committed practice” and element 6a explains that religion in families may be divisive which is defined as “disharmony with family members and others resulting from religious belief, identity, obligations, and choices” (Dollahite, et. al., 2018, p. 226). The aforementioned components from this comprehensive model of family life in the context of religion, when applied to a Black Christian family with homonegative views rooted in religious upbringing, could potentially help make sense of the experiences Black LGBQ Christians reared in non-LGBQ affirming homes.

As evidenced by the reviewed studies, religion is important to many Black families, their strength, and their sustenance. While helpful to Black families, religion can also be harmful as exemplified by the nexus of religion and family life. The present study asked participants about their experiences with their family, which included religion, as they discovered their sexual orientation. However, the individual's relationship to religion was also considered as a part of the interview process.

### **Impact of Religion on Sexual Minorities**

Research shows that there are negative outcomes for LGBQ youth when they are exposed to non-affirming religious teaching. Dahl and Galliher (2012), found that there were four negative outcomes when it came to being raised and coming out in a religious context including

feelings of inadequacy, religious related guilt, depressive symptoms, and social strain. Similarly, Gattis, Woodford, and Han (2014) found that religion could be a risk factor for discrimination-depression in LGBQ youth if the stance their denomination takes on same-sex sexuality is not affirming of sexual minorities. They posited that non-affirming faith communities with LGBQ youth should consider changing their stance or encouraging resilience in order to ensure the well-being of youth within the congregation.

While exploring the relationship between religious faith, internalized homonegativity, and resiliency, Walker & Longmire-Avital (2013), found that religious faith can lead to increased resilience for Black LGBQ emerging adults if their religious group is inclusive of all congregants no matter their sexual orientation. The authors noted that if Black LGBQ emerging adults are exposed to negative religious rhetoric, they are at risk of developing internalized homonegativity which is detrimental to their psychological well-being.

The findings of Garrett-Walker and Torres (2017) supported the research above as well. They surveyed 20 Black cisgender queer men about the impact of negative religious rhetoric in their lives and found that there were social and personal consequences of being subjected to this rhetoric. Negative religious rhetoric was defined as sermons in which people who are attracted to the same-sex were referred to as deviant, an abomination, and against the will of God. Among the personal and social consequences of this rhetoric for the people who heard it were isolation and violence against LGBQ communities respectively.

The literature cited above exemplifies how religious communities, including churches and families, that perpetuate and teach negative messages about sexual and gender diversity often do so at the psychological, spiritual, and social expense of their LGBQ members. The

present study sought to understand the impact these messages had, or continue to have, on Black LGBQ Christians and how it related to how they make meaning of faith.

### **Negotiating Spiritual Identity and Sexual Orientation**

Researchers note that there are many ways to navigate life as someone as a member of the LGBQ community who holds a Christian faith (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Foster, et al., 2015; Ganzervoot, et al., 2011; Halkitis, et al, 2009; Lassiter, 2015; Winder, 2015; Woodell, et al., 2015). Earlier studies on spiritual identity and sexual orientation negotiation contribute to the notion that Christianity is incompatible with an LGBQ sexual orientation. For example, Halkitis, et al. (2009) conducted a study with 498 LGBQ individuals who were raised in a religious home, 75% of whom were raised Christian. They found that 75% of their participants no longer formally held membership in religious institutions, but remained committed to their religious or spiritual lives in other ways. This commitment to spiritual life is consistent with the research Dahl & Galliher (2012) conducted to examine the interaction between sexual and religious identity development with LGBQ youth. They found the participants of their study had similar trajectories with their spiritual development and acceptance of their sexual orientation. Their findings illustrated the following trajectory for LGBQ Christian youth: 1) early engagement with their religious communities, 2) questioning their attractions, 3) questioning their religion, 4) experiencing discomfort with both, 5) changing their relationship to their religious community, 6) coming out, and 7) developing their own value systems.

While leaving the formal institution of Christianity is one way to navigate the tension that may come from engaging in a faith that condemns a part of your identity, there are also other options. A study conducted by Ganzervoot, et al. (2011), asserted that individuals from their study who grew up Christian and gay, chose one of the following: 1) Christian lifestyle, 2) gay

lifestyle<sup>1</sup>, 3) compartmentalization of both (mutual exclusivity), or 4) integrating both (reconciliation) to minimize the cognitive dissonance that develops in LGBQ youth when they are finding who they are is misaligned with who their faith says they should be. This study showed that while abandoning some part of your identity– be it religious identity or sexual orientation– may be how some gay Christian individuals may make sense of their experience, living with the tension or achieving reconciliation is possible.

There were studies that examined how individuals engaged in this reconciliation process, or how they maintained relationships with religion given their minority sexual orientation (Woodell, et al., 2015; Winder, 2015). Woodell, et al. (2015) stated the main two strategies their Southern LGBQ participants used to reconcile their identities as LGBQ and Christian involved a personal connection to an accepting God and finding a local church in their community where they felt accepted. A different, but similar, strategy for reconciliation that researchers found include individuals changing negative religious messaging from churches to positive and replicating a communal church experience with a community-based organization (Winder, 2015). Winder's study included 26 Black gay men who worked alongside others in community organizations to repurpose religious messaging from negative to positive. The participants either left formally recognized churches and decided to remain in their community space or remained in churches where the negative messaging was taught, but they shared space with their community to offset the negative messages they heard in their home churches.

While the aforementioned studies focused on the strategies for reconciliation, some research studies focus on the shared patterns of LGBQ Christians during the reconciliation process. Foster, et al. (2015) developed a model known as *LG Christian Spiritual Resilience*.

---

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is offensive as it implies that LGBQ identity is a choice.

They found the process of reconciliation was similar for all Christian lesbians and gays in their study, which included transforming theological meaning, finding a safe enough congregation, or finding an affirming congregation in order to integrate their faith system and their sexual orientation (Foster, et al., 2015). According to Foster and colleagues (2015), lesbian and gay individuals must first recognize there is some incongruence between their sexual orientation and their faith tradition, then their distress will lead them to do one of the three things listed above: (1) transform theological meaning, (2) find a safe enough congregation, or (3) find an affirming congregation which would lead to integration and working for social justice within congregations.

When interviewing Black same-gender loving (SGL) men who were raised Christian, Lassiter (2015) found that in order to reconcile their identities, the men had to (1) accept and be happy with themselves (2) have a sense of integrity and understand that regardless of what others say, they are not perverse. Lassiter also found there were six (6) methods Black SGL men used to reconcile: (1) geographic distance from home church and family, (2) personal interpretation of Biblical text, (3) positive, individually driven education about same-sex sexual orientation, (4) giving support to and receiving support from other Black SGL people, (5) using their lived experience to guide their actions, and finally, (6) understanding reconciliation as practice, meaning they needed to engage in reconciliatory actions regularly.

This literature review provides an overview of some of the studies that have investigated the relationship between LGBQ individuals and religion, specifically Christianity. Although some studies engaged Black LGBQ people specifically, the majority were focused on the experiences of Black men. Although there is some, mainly theological, scholarship about Black LGBQ people, faith, and identity, (Coleman, 2008; Douglas, 1999; Lightsey, 2015) there is a

lack of research that directly centers the voices and lived experiences of Black LGBTQ people. There is especially a dearth of research that does so while applying a family studies lens to understand the complexities of identity, faith, and family. It is imperative to hear and honor the voices and stories of this population and to learn from their lived experiences to gain a deeper understanding of how their relationships with their families and religion can impact their faith and sense of self.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Using qualitative methodology, this study sought to gain insight into how Black LGBTQ Christians make meaning of faith and how that meaning-making process impacted their self-esteem. Qualitative research is described by Creswell and Poth (2018) as an approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem in which the researcher builds a “complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting” ( p. 8). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, phenomenology was the best way to capture information from the participants as I explored how they made meaning of their experiences with identity development as Black LGBTQ Christians while taking their self-esteem into consideration. A phenomenological study is one that describes the “essence” of a shared experience, or a phenomenon, for several individuals in order to derive a central meaning from the participants’ shared experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze these interviews, which is a specific type of phenomenology. An interpretive approach to phenomenology entails research that aims not to describe a phenomenon, but to interpret the meaning participants are making of their lived experience (Vagle, 2018). This type of analysis allows for more flexibility in terms of allowing participants to maintain their unique experiences rather than to flatten the participants’ experience to a few

central themes (Chan & Farmer, 2017). All of the questions in the interview protocol were broad and open-ended as suggested by Creswell & Poth (2018), and Chan and Farmer (2017). The questions were also developed by looking at previous studies that sought to understand the interaction between sexual orientation and Christian faith development (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

The frameworks I used to shape my research question(s), in the development of the interview protocol, and to analyze the data were social constructivism and a networked model of ecological systems theory (Neal & Neal, 2013). Both of these frameworks aim to help understand a person's experiences and development in the context of their environment. Social constructivism is an interpretive framework also referred to as interpretivism, that suggests individuals derive meaning from their lived experiences and thus construct their own reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This framework explains that lived experiences and the meanings made of them are not naturally occurring, objective phenomena, but are created through interactions with others in their social environment, and through historical and cultural norms which present themselves in individuals' lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My research question was specifically about the process of making meaning of the participants' lived experiences with faith and their sexual orientation. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory asserts that individuals are shaped by their environments at five different levels which are limited to physical settings and are encompassed or nested within one another (Neal & Neal, 2013; Hayes, et al., 2017). However, a networked approach to this theory asserts that instead of the systems being limited to physical settings, the interactions of people within the systems serve as the setting which allows for intersecting systems rather than nested systems. The networked model of ecological systems theory is more relational and addresses the complexity of human development and contextualizes

it in terms of social interactions instead of prescribing the settings for systems in advance (Neal & Neal, 2013). Using Neal & Neal's (2013) alternative model and definitions, microsystems are those social interactions that directly involve the developing person in question. Mesosystems are the social interactions between persons in the developing persons microsystems, but without said person present. This networked approach to ecological systems theory was the best fit for this paper because I specifically sought to understand a family microsystem, a church microsystem, and a family-church mesosystem in the context of Black LGBTQ Christian development.

### **Positionality**

As a member of the populations in question and because of my research method, it was important for me to take my own personal biases into consideration. As a Black, 26-year-old queer femme who has held membership in both the LGBTQ and Christian communities, this work was and remains deeply personal. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of my peers in hopes of potentially being able to make recommendations about how Black LGBTQ youth who find themselves navigating both, Christian and LGBTQ, identities could do so in a less psychologically and spiritually taxing way than I, and some of my peers, have had to. It would be remiss of me to say my personal biases have had no influence on the analysis of the data, but according to Chan & Farmer, subjectivity can be a useful tool for phenomenological research (2017). However, to best understand and analyze the data, I had to set aside the experience I had to gather information from the experience of the participants in the study, or engage in a process called bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

To recruit participants for this study, a criterion sampling technique was used as there were certain criteria concerning race, age, and religion that needed to be met to ensure the quality of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were recruited from organizations whose constituents were Black LGBQ Christians and other faculty and student contacts. Faculty, staff, and students sent the recruitment email to organizations with whom they were connected and no individuals were specifically targeted for recruitment. I provided the organizations and individuals with the recruitment email to disseminate to potential participants. From there, the organizations and individuals shared the information with their connections. If potential participants were interested, they completed a secure google form as outlined in the recruitment message, and I contacted them for screening. If participants passed the screening, we then proceeded to schedule an interview.

In order to be selected for inclusion in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: be between the ages of 18-64, identify as LGBQ, Christian, and Black, and identify as being raised in a non-LGBQ affirming Christian church or home that was non-affirming. Anyone who did not fit that criteria was excluded from the study. All participants were compensated with an Amazon gift card immediately following the interview.

## **Data Collection**

In order to answer the questions “How do Black LGBQ Christians who were raised in non-affirming Christian homes make meaning of faith and what impact does that have on their self-esteem?” I conducted 11 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. According to Hesse-Biber (2014), this type of interview is useful for understanding how an individual thinks, feels, and

believes their specific set of circumstances when it comes to a particular issue, especially circumstances and stories that are being told by people who are marginalized in society.

I conducted in-person interviews using the interview protocol complete with probing questions, from August to November 2019. During the interviews, which lasted on average of about an hour, participants were asked 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix C) in order for me to gain an understanding of their belief system in their youth, their understanding of their sexual orientation or gender identity throughout their life, how the two identities worked together to form their sense of self, and ultimately their current beliefs and how they feel about themselves. There were questions that were demographical in nature and others that were developed in an effort to best solicit the information necessary to address the research question. Participants also had the opportunity at the end of their interview to provide more information in case there were parts of their story they felt were pertinent to their experience of faith at present and were not addressed during other parts of the interview.

During the informed consent process all participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and that their information would be kept confidential. I was the only person collecting data and the participants were assigned alphanumeric codes for other record-keeping purposes. The informed consent form (See Appendix B) did not require the participants' signature to ensure the participants' identities were protected to the fullest extent possible; participants verbally consented to be a part of the study and maintained a copy for their records. There were 11 total participants, eight of whom were cisgender women and the remaining three were cisgender men. In terms of the sexual orientations represented by the sample, participants identified as bisexual (n=3), gay (n=2), lesbian (n=3), queer (n=2), and same-gender loving (n=1). They were from a variety of Christian traditions including Catholic (n=2), COGIC (n=3),

Missionary Baptist (n=2), AME (n=1), non-denominational (n=2) and Presbyterian (n=1). This demographic information is highlighted below in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Gender	Orientation	Age
Jael	ciswoman	bisexual	20
Justin	cisman	gay	20
Leah	ciswoman	bisexual	22
Andre	cisman	bisexual	19
Sharon	ciswoman	Same-gender loving	39
Mary	ciswoman	lesbian	41
Imani	ciswoman	lesbian	43
Nevaeh	genderqueer	queer	18
Reggie	cisman	gay	33
Naomi	ciswoman	lesbian	41
Candace	ciswoman	queer	39

**Data Analysis**

Data collected during the study was analyzed using (IPA), a methodology suggested to use by Chan and Farmer (2017) for research with LGBQ populations due to its ability to allow the researcher to account for the complexities in each participant's experience. Using this method for analysis requires 1) reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, 2) making initial notes on the transcripts, 3) developing themes, and 4) making connections between and across the discovered themes. Although these are listed systematically, IPA is a cyclical process.

Each interview was transcribed manually while listening to the audio-recording and double checked for accuracy. After transcription, I read each interview multiple times over varying periods of time. I engaged in a process of inductive coding (Hesse-Biber, 2010), meaning I didn't use any particular framework to come up with the codes; I simply read the transcripts and looked for patterns, trends, and similarities in the participants narrative responses. Initial coding (Hesse-Biber, 2010) resulted in seven themes. After consultation with my advisors, I was able to add two additional codes and ultimately came up with four superordinate themes and nine subordinate themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness, all interview transcripts were sent to participants for review, I wrote memos as soon as I could after interviews, and I had meetings with my advisors about the process of coding and to be sure I was using the best methodology for conducting data analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, all participants were sent the transcripts and allowed to edit them to more accurately reflect their experiences. This process is sometimes referred to as member checking or participant validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the data collection and analysis process, I wrote memos because according to Hesse-Biber (2014), the memo writing process enables the researcher to identify interpretations of the data that may need revisions. The meetings with my advisors ensured I was on the right track when it came to analyzing and interpreting the data. They helped, as mentioned above, with my development of codes.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study are not generalizable since they are based on highly individual experiences. This is a small sample size and is not representative of most Black LGBTQ

Christians in America on a larger scale. However, the purpose was not to be able to make generalizations about the population, rather to understand their experiences with faith, sexual orientation, and their sense of self-worth or self-esteem as Black LGBTQ Christians in the Southeast United States.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows thematic categories for this study. There were four superordinate themes found: (1) relationship to self, (2) relationship to others, (3) relationship to religion, and (4) relationship to God.

The first superordinate theme, relationship to self, describes the type of connection and dependence a participant felt to themselves and identity and includes subordinate themes of self-loathing, self-acceptance, and uncertainty with self. The second superordinate theme, relationship to others, is best described as the type of connection between the participant and the people with whom they are, or long to be, in relationship with and encompasses two subordinate themes: familial and community rejection and found family. The third superordinate theme, relationship to religion, is defined as the attitudes and levels of connectedness participants exhibit towards Christianity and includes church involvement, their view of the Bible, and the messages heard in their upbringing. The final superordinate theme, relationship to God refers to the ways in which the participants view, connect with, and feel toward who they understand God to be and maintaining a connection is the subordinate theme.

**Table 2**

*Superordinate themes and their subthemes*

Superordinate theme	Subtheme
Relationship to self	Self-loathing
	Uncertainty with self
	Self-acceptance

Table 2 (continued).

Relationship to others	Familial and community rejection Found family (actual or desired)
Relationship to religion	Church involvement Views of the Bible Messages heard in upbringing
Relationship to God	Maintaining a connection

### **Relationship to Self**

Participants in the study had complex feelings about themselves throughout the course of their lives. There were points in time where most participants disliked themselves and either still do, or have made strides to accept themselves. There were three participants who were uncertain about how they felt about themselves at present and are leaning toward acceptance, and there were six participants who fully accepted themselves and were at peace with their identity. Across the spectrum of how the participants felt about themselves, there were six who noted religion and their sexual orientation played a role in those feelings; three who said religion did and sexual orientation did not; and two who said religion did not and sexual orientation did impact their feelings about themselves.

### ***Self-loathing***

The subtheme of self-loathing explains a relationship with oneself where one dislikes a part of their identity. The language used and attitudes surrounding gender and sexual orientation as it pertains to being a part of their identity was such that it conveyed an attitude of disliking, and even as deep as hating themselves. At the time of the interviews, seven participants expressed that at some point in their journey they did not like themselves, whether that was present-day or in the past.

After being asked how he felt about himself Reggie reflected on his experience and said, “There was a time I wasn't [okay with myself], as I told you, there was a time when everyone loved me. And I literally hated me. I didn't want to see myself in a mirror.” Reggie’s statement expressed a sentiment similar to Jael’s quote, “Oh, yeah, I definitely hated myself when I was younger. Especially like, I can, like, pinpoint that...freshman year of college, uh, definitely hated myself. Like, why am I here? I'm an abomination.” When asked how he felt about himself, Justin replied “Horrible.” and after some probing, he explains his answer more, saying:

Yes. It's why I go to therapy. I need to go to therapy to do triage. But I feel bad one, I feel very, very badly. but that's just.. that's not ..I have to deal with it. I also feel bad because it's just like, part of my lacking of self-worth that I feel is because it's like, because I like guys. I'm less than. Um or it's just like I have all these other issues. And it's just like, it compounds me liking guys or makes me less, like, more bad, or like worse of a person. And, yeah, I feel like I'm a bad person in general.

Candace named that although she is now in a place of accepting and loving herself, she loathed her sexual orientation once in her life. She said, “I really am proud of the fact that I am where I am in terms of my sexuality because it really was something that I loathed.” Her loathing consisted of constant prayer for God to change her, and going to conversion therapy. Mary said that she tried to date men and prayed to be made “normal.” Sharon said “I asked God to fix me. I was like, I don't want to be like this.” Neveah made mention that they often found themselves wondering “why do I think being myself is wrong?”

### ***Uncertainty***

There were also three participants who named that they had feelings of uncertainty around the feelings they have for and connection they have with themselves. Their responses reflected an unstable relationship to their identity. Leah responded, “That’s loaded” when she was asked how she felt about herself and talked later in the interview about how her journey to self-acceptance was, at present, slow and painful. She also noted that she believes she accepts

herself “for the most part.” There was one respondent, Nevaeh, who exemplified their uncertainty the most by detailing how they felt about themselves to me: “I don’t know. There are days when I do not feel like I’m a valid human being. And I know some of it stems from being black and queer, at the same time.” They also mentioned how religion played into how they felt about themselves:

But I'd say me forming feelings about myself is.. it's a rocky road. And I feel like that would happen regardless of my... of my connection to God, but it has a large part in it, because it's an underlying feeling of am I doing what God wants?

This view of themselves showed the participants were not completely confident or sure of who they are, or of their value or worth as people. Naomi responded by saying she felt better about herself some days than others. Naomi responded to the question of if religion impacts how she sees herself by saying:

It does. It does. It does because I try to see myself like God sees me. I don't always. Sometimes I miss the mark, because I'm so demanding and try to have everything perfect. I don't always see myself that way. But I'm striving for that.

Although these participants were uncertain of how they felt about themselves, there are parts of their statements that show they are working toward self-acceptance even though at present there is some uncertainty around their relationship to themselves.

### ***Self-acceptance***

Six participants were at a place of self-acceptance at the time of the study. They all made comments about seeing themselves how God sees them. It is important to note that most of the participants who are at a place of self-acceptance, also went through a phase of self-loathing and doubting themselves. Only one participant stated that he did not have a period of disliking himself, and even he noted that was an oddity:

There’s something I think that is atypical of my experience, that being I never really had that moment where I thought it was bad to be queer. It's not like a bad thing? Yeah. It was

presented as something awful and deviant or what have you, but it was never like I wanted to be straight.

Andre explained that he “for the most part” liked himself. While earlier in the interview he expressed that he had never absorbed any anti-gay messages from the church, he also expressed that he received and internalized those messages from his family.

The participants who accepted themselves, like all other participants, were asked afterward about how religion and sexual orientation impacted their feelings about themselves.

Mary answered saying:

I have very high self-esteem. Um, you know, I, I think, you know, pretty dope girl. I'm, you know, proud of my accomplishments. I think that I'm intelligent. I think that I'm smart. I think that I am sweet and caring. I think I'm a good parent. I'm a great friend. I'm a good partner. I think I try to do good things, you know, for the community and for people that I care about and even the people I don't care about. So I'm comfortable with who I am. I'm comfortable in my own skin. I know that I'm different from a lot of people. But I think that I'm a valuable part of society and the community that I'm a part of.

There was a similar response from Sharon:

How do I feel about myself? I feel like I'm beautiful, I'm sexy, smart. I think what makes me attractive is that I can, I can see the love. And I can see the light in everyone. I like helping people find their way.

Reggie, whose quote is partially listed in the self-loathing section, answered by saying:

I love me. I think we're always striving to be better. But I'm okay with me. There was a time I wasn't, as I told you, there was a time when everyone loved me. And I, I literally hated me... So now I'm definitely in a place where I really love me. I'm okay with being me. As I said, we're all striving to be better. Am I perfect? No. But I'm really in a good space as it relates to me. I love the fact that I'm able to help people reconcile their sexuality and spirituality. And I'm not forcing anything on anyone. I still preach Jesus. Christ and Him crucified. I still preach it, but it's just I'm just in a place where I am finally appreciative of what and of really what God called me to be not what I thought he was, but now I know who and what he called me to be. So I'm really grateful because in this, this fills me up for real; it really fills me up because there was a time where I couldn't say that, that .. I'm glad you asked that question because it just did something for me like, I am okay. I'm okay. I am.

Again, you can also see a similar pattern in Candace's statement on how she felt about herself:

I feel good about myself. Yeah, I think I'm really proud of myself. And people who know me well, I think they can testify to that too. Like, I really am proud of the fact that I am where I am in terms of my sexuality because it really was something that I loathed. And so like just being able to be comfortable in my skin, I feel comfortable in my skin, I feel happy about where I am in terms of my faith-- that I don't, I don't feel pressure to perform or to be anything that anybody wants me to be. I think I'm evolving. You know, I'm continuing to evolve. And learn and grow and I'm proud of that, that I'm like not stuck.

Jael had a more concise answer and responded saying “I mean like being LGBTQ and Christian I think like I'm just really secure in that.”

**Changing their self-perception.** Amongst participants who had accepted themselves, they all spoke about the importance of letting go of other people's thoughts and feelings and learning to lean on God and their opinions of themselves. Naomi said “I guess for me to, well, for me to accept myself, I had to I guess I had to stop. I had to stop thinking about what everybody else was going to think.” She continues to talk about who “everyone else” included, namely her deceased mother. After letting go of that, she said “Then I had to figure out that God still loves me. Then I was able to accept myself.” Imani said that her fear of rejection held her back from being authentic:

My journey of self-acceptance was ups and downs and ups and downs and denying who I was for so long just because of everyone else ..every because one- I was scared people would reject me. You know, then two- I was scared that harm would come to me.

She went on to discuss the ways in which that fear manifested in her life and ended her reflection by saying “Self-acceptance came when I realized it was really every man for himself and it's my business. My life.” Candace also spoke about authenticity and this need to be herself with the people around her in order to start accepting who she is and living freely. She said “ I started to sort of fall in love with myself just being honest, authentic and I started telling people, like even you know, my mother, my family like y'all don't really know me.” Candace also mentioned going to therapy. Jael, Neveah, and Justin mentioned going to therapy as well. They all cited therapy as being able to help them be able to accept themselves more.

Reggie's self-acceptance was also rooted in letting go of other peoples' perceptions of him, but he also explicitly mentioned Jesus and Christianity in his statement explaining how he got to a place of self-love and acceptance. He said, "I started loving me because I was, I think I was hating myself more because I didn't know if they, if I, was accepted in this religion." Sharon shared her story of self-acceptance and said that it came after she believed God accepted her just as she was by connecting her with someone who shared her story, understanding she didn't need to change, and then deciding what the Divine looked like for her.

Seven participants expressed at some point in the interview that they disliked themselves at some points in their lives. Although there are some participants who are still in that self-loathing stage, there are also people who have come to a place of self-acceptance. Even though it would be easy to look at this as a binary relationship to self, there are also people who are in the middle, or are pretty uncertain about themselves. If participants changed their view of themselves, they mainly expressed that they needed to let go of how much they valued other people's opinions on their identity as LGBTQ and Christian.

### **Relationship to Others**

All of the participants in the study spoke about how their relationship to other people impacted their faith and how they thought about themselves. While reviewing the transcripts, there was a common theme of familial and community rejection at some point in each of their stories. There was also data that showed the participants either desired to have people around them who could affirm their identity, or had cultivated that kind of community for themselves.

#### ***Familial and Community Rejection (Actual or Anxiety)***

Each participant was asked to talk about how their family responded when they disclosed their sexual orientation. If participants had not disclosed their sexual orientation to any person in

their family, they were asked about why they had not done so. Every participant stated that during their journey, at some point, their family or important people in their community rejected them in some way. Rejection was used pretty widely when I was coding, so any response wherein participants discussed identity invalidation, how taboo of a topic it was, or how people may have reacted to them was broadly labeled as rejection.

There were participants who noted that their sexuality was ignored by their family. When discussing her family dynamic and her sexual orientation, Mary said:

So I think everyone in my family knows, but we don't talk about it. It's not discussed. It's not like "oh, she's coming here with her girlfriend!" My mother still says your friend, your roommate, that kind of thing. I don't think she can wrap her mind around accepting it enough to call it what it is. So I just kind of let her do what she needs to do. So I don't know if I will say I'm out or not like, my family knows but we don't talk about it.

She then followed that statement up expressing her apprehension around disclosing her sexual orientation to other people:

People who are really close to me who I feel like will be a part of that part of my life and if they know but, you know, people that I just deal with, because I feel like there's so much judgment that's associated with that. And I feel like I have a lot to offer, you know, black PhD psychologist there are things I want to do and I don't want all of the things that I feel like I can bring to the table to be overshadowed by somebody saying "oh, but she has a girlfriend." So, I'm really not like I don't broadcast it

When asked about the role religion played in her coming out process, Leah recalled an experience from earlier in her childhood:

And then I thought about that conversation that woman had so long ago because I feel like I've heard that more than once before from other people in the community like, Oh, "I love you but like, you know, God doesn't agree with this" you know? After being asked what community she was referring to, Leah responded "I feel like other Christians, other Black Christians or people that I know are Black Christians..." which let me know she was referring to a religious community.

Although the rejection was not always overt, some participants noted covert rejection, or a softer form of non-acceptance from their families. Jael noted this type of rejection when she told the story about coming out to her mom at ten years old: “And I was like, ‘You know what, mom? I'm bisexual.’ She's like, ‘but can you promise me to marry a man?’ So...” Sharon said that her mother reacted in a similar way. When asked about her family's reaction to her disclosure of her sexual orientation Sharon said:

They did not react well at all. Like, my mom. My dad, he was okay. My mom was like, This is not true. You're gonna get married to a man, you're gonna have kids. I don't believe this. This is a lie.

Candace also talked about a more covert rejection from her mother in terms of how their relationship started to shift. She says:

Well.. when I was in my early 20s when I started like having like, clearly having girlfriends, or whatever, I never really made a declaration or said like "hey, you know, let's talk about me being gay." But I had girlfriends... living with me and that created a lot, quite a bit of tension between me and my mother in particular.

In the same response as the above quote, she also detailed that she and her mother shared a strong bond over their Christian faith and that was what was starting to waver even though there were no explicit conversations surrounding Candace's faith.

There were also instances of overt rejection from family and community members. This could mean the families and communities were making disparaging comments about the participant, or would have other types of adverse reactions to learning their family member was LGBTQ. Reggie said that when he came out, he received many prayers insinuating the people who were praying for him thought there was something wrong about his sexual orientation. He said:

I told my family and of course I got plenty of calls and it was prayer, we're gonna bind this devil, and this just a phase, this is just an attack of the enemy against what God has placed on the inside of you, this is the deception, this is the enemy's way of stopping the word that God has given you.

Andre made it known that he is not out to his family due to personal safety reasons. When asked about his family dynamic and their knowledge of his sexual orientation he said, “I would be in

every sense of the word disowned.” After talking about this for a while, Andre told me that, “but for my mother's side, I just won't exist. I'd be disowned.. I'm underage.. I'll be formally disowned ‘..never come back home’ ‘Don't talk to us unless you've changed’ type stuff...” which shows he knew there would be severe consequences to being out with his family. Although Jael's mother had a softer response, her dad did not. She explained, “I told my dad I guess it was freshman year of college, that summer between freshman and sophomore year. And he was like, ‘get out this house’ and all this other stuff.” Neveah said that they were once in conversation with their parents and were considering coming out to them. During that time, a family friend came over and asked them “do you like girls or something?” to which Neveah did not respond. They told me that this person said “I was just wondering. I never hear anything. But you know, if I ever find out, I'ma run you over,” which was followed by laughter from their parents. Neveah decided after that conversation that it was not safe to come out to their parents because of the rejection they would experience.

Naomi detailed the reactions of a lot of people in her family. She talked about the adverse reactions from her dad and her daughter citing that both were upset with her at first and eventually came around. Although her mother is deceased, she still played a role in how Naomi navigated her sexual orientation. She stated “So honestly for me because my mom meant so much to me. I had to deal with what really would my mom think about this?” and recalled that she had asked her mom about what she would do if her brother turned out to be gay. She let me know her mom would say “I wouldn't approve because that's wrong, but I would still love him because that's my child” which is how Naomi thought her mom might respond to her.

Concerning the death of parents, there were also a couple of other participants who talked about either how their parents dying or potentially dying could help them live more full lives. Although

Imani did not explicitly mention her family as rejecting her, she did say she did not care to be accepted. Her exact words were “I didn't care once my mother and father died. I was free to do whatever I wanted to do on Earth.. Once they died, I didn't care what anyone thought.” When Justin was asked about his family dynamic and his sexual orientation, he responded saying:

If my mom dies, how would I feel if she doesn't know? Probably a whole lot better. Not a whole lot better. But it's like, because the whole main part of the reason why I grew up being homophobic as I was, because I've learned from home like, even though I'm somewhat different about it, that part is still there.

Justin also expressed fear around losing his church community should he decide to come out.

Whether the participants experienced actual rejection from their families or had a fear of being rejected, rejection was a common theme for all participants. They felt invisible by having their sexual orientation ignored by their families, expressed safety concerns due to their families' beliefs, dealt with changing relationship dynamics with their family after their disclosure of their sexual orientation, or waited or had a desire to wait until certain family members were not around because they were afraid of rejection.

### ***Found Family (Actual or Desired)***

Although participants were rejected in some form from their families of origin, they all either had or expressed a desire to have a group of people with whom they could belong, or a community. These were people with whom the participants can be their full and authentic selves and be accepted. These were also people with whom the participants found they could do life and faith.

Participants talked fondly about these people – their found family – and the role they played in helping them regain or maintain a healthy spiritual life. Reggie recalled his roommate helping him out: “I separated myself from church. And then my roommate at the time was an organist. He played for a church and like I'd go. And I went and one service made me remember

what I liked.” This is similar to Sharon’s description of the many people along her journey who helped her recognize her calling and to live authentically. She mentioned a mentor she had who helped her along when she was describing her time away from church. Sharon said of her mentor: “So, just being able to meet someone that was going through what I went through and going through that theological education allowed me to go back to church.” Jael mentioned how having a space for people of color who were also raised religious and are members of the LGBTQ community is helpful for her:

You know, talking to people and like having those like, QTPOC like, those spaces where you can just be queer and be person of color and then there's Christians in there too. And you're just like, okay, maybe this is all going to be okay. Like, this is.. this like going to a PWI, going to those gay spaces where there's only white people... And then like I know that's not supposed to play a role but it does, you know, but going to QTPOC or those meetings where we have those have other people of color and they're just like, yeah, you know, I grew up Christian, I'm Christian and we'll talk about God.

Naomi discussed how at home she felt when she went to the church she did decide to make her church home:

I walked in, and I just felt this authentic, genuine love... This warm, loving, spirit. But there were only like five people there and there's no music corner, all they had was a drummer singing praise and worship. It was this huge place and the little tiny preacher with this huge spirit, I felt like, I'm at home.

She elaborated more and ended up saying that the congregation at her new church was very accepting and she actually ended up working for them. Imani, however, really did not find that sense of community she was seeking by being a member of a church. She said “I'm not a member of a church because the church is supposed to be a community; it's supposed to be like a family,” which showed that she desired a different connection than was offered by churches in her community.

Sharon described the community she found and has created after needing to rebuild her faith and relationship to the church as “family” in the following statement:

I have now taken control of what I learn and what I believe and who I put in my circle. You know, I have a spiritual father in DC and he preached this sermon about Jesus getting baptized, and how he created the family he wanted with the disciples. And that has been something that has stuck with me since I heard that sermon and so that's what I do, I intentionally create family- we call it family, my wife and I, with people who are like us.

Mary also made note of taking control of who is in her life, detailing it as follows:

If you're not able to tell somebody who you feel like is really close to you right now, this part of you and you're afraid that they're going to leave or talk about you or whatever, then that person probably shouldn't be in your life anyway. So you've got to come to the point where you overcome that fear. And put everything out on the table and see what you're left with because what you're going to be left with are the, like the core foundation of who you should be dealing with anyway, like you're going to get rid of people that shouldn't be around even though it's going to be painful. It's necessary because they don't need to be there if they're not gonna be able to accept who you are completely.

Candace shared something similar when it came to cultivating who she wanted around, even on social media:

So yeah, it was just like taking little steps and cutting off people who didn't make me feel good to be quite honest you know whether it was even if they didn't know through social media I just blocked people, but it was cathartic going through my list like "nope, you posted something stupid" and just blocking people.

Reggie also cultivated a community and is a pastor of an affirming church which he discussed as being similar to a family.

Some participants talked about how connecting with others in general was good for their mental health, aside from religion. Leah stated:

I think that like coming to college and meeting those people that I like yearned for when I was younger, made a difference. So like, I have a lot of people in my corner like I just didn't have that when I was younger. So like, I feel like it got much better.

Neveah was describing how mentally she has hard days and can lean on her community for support if she needs it. After describing a scenario where she was having a hard time, she stated "I try to force myself to spend time with my friends, especially my queer friends, I try to spend time with them, or like, make sure that I see them in some kind of way or text them." Her friends

served as a source of social support; a network of people whom she can trust to uplift her in her time of need. Andre explained how his comfort level with his sexual orientation changed after he was able to make connections with people in his local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) center. He said, “It was the counseling from talking to the centers queer staff and leaders at the center that helped a tremendous amount,” after detailing his journey to unlearning negative messages he had been taught about the LGBQ community in his culture and religion.

Lastly, there were a few participants who lamented not having connections to people who were able to affirm their identities or wondered what life would be like if they did have such connections. Justin said “I don’t really have any gay friends.” at the end of his interview. He then went on to explain how he wants to be involved with his local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community center, but is afraid because of stigma. Sharon noted that she “didn’t have any mentors” and that was why she “asked God to change her straight” toward the end of her interview. Candace said during her life she would wonder things such as “what if I did go to a church that was affirming?” or “what if I went to a gay club?” or “what if I were around a whole bunch of people who were out and gay?” during her process of self-acceptance.

Some participants worked to cultivate the family they desired and others expressed a desire to have people with whom they were able to be themselves authentically. Either way the hope for or realization of a found family helped participants to remain engaged in their spiritual lives because the people in their lives affirmed their sexual orientation and spiritual identity. Support from other people was very key to the participants being able to engage with faith in ways that were life-giving and edifying and not condemning or draining.

## **Relationship to Religion**

As part of the interview, I asked participants to detail their journey with faith when they were growing up. Most participants were heavily involved in the church in their youth and some continue to be involved either in similar ways or with slight modifications in their adult life. There are some who have maintained a connection to religion, some who have cultivated their own communities, some who have left churches altogether and decided that they would pursue individual relationships with God aside from religion.

### ***Church involvement***

Growing up the participants had varying levels of engagement with their church environments and as they continue to make meaning of faith, they still have varied levels of engagement. Ten of the participants had a period of separation from the church at some point in their journey, meaning there were times when they were less involved or stopped attending at all as they grappled with their sexual orientation and the messages they received from their respective churches.

Reggie and Sharon both grew up in COGIC churches and are now ordained ministers in other denominations. Reggie was in church often during his upbringing. He remembers his upbringing affectionately stating “I just, I grew up in it. I was at one point in my life it was actually all I knew.” He said that he had a desire to be in church from a very young age. Reggie explained that his excitement waned when he knew preachers who were going to be giving anti-LGBQ messages would be visiting his church. Reggie had been preaching his entire life and recently switched to an affirming denomination. Sharon was also raised similarly to Reggie and did not go to church for a while until she met a mentor who encouraged her that she could go back.

Candace, Jael, Leah, and Naomi all currently attend churches that are different from the ones in their youth because their new churches are affirming of LGBTQ people. Candace said that as she was growing up, she was in church often. She remembered “I was in church, of course, every Sunday pretty much all day and then throughout the week as well, like participating in choir and all that stuff, youth ministry.” She said that at the church she found the pastor is affirming, but the congregants have mixed attitudes and the denomination is still non-affirming. Jael also remembered her experience with church growing up fondly. She said that she “got jacked out of bed” every Sunday morning and said “it was good” because she enjoyed the choir, Sunday school, and going to Bible camp. When speaking of her present experience she said, “I love church. I still love church and I go to like a more LGBTQ church now. So it's just better.” Leah noted that her participation in church was spotty because her family changed churches a lot, but is currently involved in a ministry where she has support from a small group of other Christians. Naomi was heavily involved in her home church after her mother died, assuming many of her mother's responsibilities. She told me she is currently on staff for the church of which she is now a member.

Imani and Andre do not attend church regularly, if at all. They both grew up in Catholic homes and are immigrants. Imani was reared in an environment where she attended Catholic schools. Andre mentioned how he really could never really immerse himself in the church experience when he was younger. Neveah said they do not currently attend church, but really enjoyed church in their youth noting that they were involved in the choir, they were a missionary, and they were attending mid-week Bible study as they got older. Once they realized they were queer, they said they started to push away more. During the interview they said, “Not being in church and having to do more one on one stuff has definitely helped me because I'm

away from being indoctrinated in this specific way that I've been for most of my life” after I asked them to explain their relationship to faith now that they describe and understand themselves as queer.

Mary was very involved in the AME Zion denomination stating her mom was the reason for her involvement. She described her relationship to the church growing up as follows:

We were really, really ingrained in faith. We prayed at home, we talked about God and all of our faith and trust and every decision that we made was put in the terms and context of our faith in God. So I'd say I was from a very religious, spiritual and religious background.

She said she currently attends and is heavily involved in a church in the same denomination which is not affirming. She said, “I am like a missionary, I sing in the choir, I'm on the praise team, I work with the youth, I do the mental health ministry, I do all these things.” She also expressed that she enjoyed serving the church in the ways she does. Justin said he is also still in a church that is not affirming of LGBTQ people. He said that growing up he learned to perform well and he was taught that he should be of service to the church. He said, “helping out with service, being the usher, be with the choir, whatever,” were things that he was obligated to do in addition to speaking or preaching occasionally. He told me he currently serves for a campus ministry and is of service to his church when he goes home.

### ***Views of the Bible***

Many participants spoke about how their relationship with the Bible impacted their faith.

Candace talked about how she views the Bible at length towards the end of her interview:

We're fallible. How can we write something that's infallible? A lot of these are historical accounts. We know that historical accounts can be convoluted and can be based on social location, can be, you know, based on perspective. I think there are a lot of great.. I think there are some truths or good principles that you can live your life... you should live your life by or could whatever, if you choose to. But I also think there's a lot of malarkey.

After making this statement she discussed enjoying certain stories in the Bible, and how her reading of the text has changed over time. She was raised to take the Bible literally and expressed that she did not feel as though that was accurate or true for her anymore. Neveah names the Bible as a source of stress. They explained that their mother got them a Bible as a graduation gift, but that they have not spent time reading it. The feelings and questions they had surrounding the Bible were tied up with them feeling validated as a Christian and a self-described queer person:

Who knows, if somebody who wrote this is even telling the truth? And then I'm just like, if all of that is there, how am I supposed to face me being valid as a Christian, and being queer on a book that we hold so close? That might.. might not even be what God actually wants us to do? And if that's not what God wants us to do, how are we supposed ..How am I supposed to know what God wants me to do? and how that relates to me being a Christian and being queer at the same time.

Similarly, Sharon was upset at God for not “fixing” her so she thought, “Well, if I stop reading the Bible, I will keep finding stuff that I'm going to hell for so I just stopped.” Jael said, “I view the Bible as interpretation. So it's a story and I take everything in it with a grain of salt because you know, it's an old story ... a story that has been passed down for generations” after talking at length about how she uses the Bible back against people who try to use it to condemn her sexual orientation. Justin also said, “The Bible is really open to interpretation of it.” He recalled reading the Bible every summer and having discussions with his mom that solidified his point of view. He said “I just read the Bible. But I realized that sometimes, like some I'd be like well, you know, this isn't...you're taking it this way, but I'm not getting that from this.” Naomi expressed that while she was taught that the Bible was the infallible Word of God growing up, she has departed from that line of thinking. In the middle of her explaining how she made meaning of faith, she said, “I believe that it is inspired by God and should be used as a guide to live, not as the gospel.”

### *Messages heard growing up*

Although they grew up in different settings, all participants heard negative messages about LGBTQ communities in their upbringing. If they did not hear the negative messages explicitly, they expressed that in their communities or congregations people understood that non-heterosexual sexual orientation was a taboo topic; it was something that should not be discussed.

Andre heard growing up that being gay was a sign of demonic possession stating that people would cast LGBTQ people to hell. After he was asked about what he heard growing up, he immediately responded, “not good things” and then later noted that he heard, “all the gays are just they're just going to burn wholesale like, they're going to ... straight to the inferno.” Jael also heard messages that implied that being a member of the LGBTQ community was something that required asking for salvation. Leah recalled a story about a similar implication by a church member:

I mean, I feel like I've heard.. I've heard it before, like my pastors or whoever speak about it. And from what I remember was just told.. it wasn't told directly to me, but my group like that there was a story someone was given about where somebody had come out to their mother and that that youth leader at that time, she was just saying, "Oh, I loved her response", because it was like, you know, "I love you, but I agree with what God says, but like, I still love you." So that was my experience of hearing like, you know what, I guess God says about that, even though she wasn't direct. She was sort of like, to me kind of pandering around like, it's wrong, but like, I still love you, which a lot of people feel that way.

She followed this statement up by recalling that her mother said, “it's in the Bible. You know, God doesn't, you know, agree with that or I don't care what you know, society says.. it's not right” when she was growing up. Although it was not her lived experience, she recalled popular culture shows that are heavily influenced by Black Christianity citing Tyler Perry shows and Greenleaf that also have Black people casting out demons from their gay characters. Neveah mentioned hearing negative messages in church after she got to college. She said her deacons would do a welcome and mention that they were not welcoming of “those gay people” or state

that in the middle of a sermon the speaker would make commentary about Jesus' return and said, "but he's not coming back for the gay people." Reggie said that he was exposed to a pastor whose sermons "would be cross dressers, sissies, faggots, dykes. That was his way. This is what you heard." Sharon said that growing up she heard messages she did not really understand at the time. "All I know is when I went to church. They were always preaching about saying it's Adam and Eve, not Steve" is what she said she heard growing up. Jael noted that although it was not her pastor, she heard things such as "pray that they get out of their ways... he wasn't I guess as horrible. You know not pray the gay away it was just like pray that they find the light and they found salvation."

When asked about the messages she heard growing up concerning LGBTQ people, Mary said "I know that the consensus at church and among people was that, you know, homosexuality was wrong, that God, you know, made men and women together, and any deviation of that is an abomination." She followed this sentiment up with the statement "I just don't know that it specifically came out in a sermon, but that was the conversation from church people." This is similar to Naomi, who when asked about messages she received growing up stated:

We really didn't hear any messages about that, about gay people. It just wasn't talked about. It was more we knew it was wrong, but we don't talk about it. It was one of those churches where usually the choir director was gay, but it was overlooked. Because he was gay and he was good so we don't want to upset things or we don't want to rock the boat. But since things are happy, then we'll just let it be. It's not one of those things that we're gonna mess with.

Imani responded in a similar manner stating "Never. Never spoken of. None of that even though you know, the term homosexual or immoral acts within the Bible. You never heard anyone in the church mention it." After I probed about conversations in her community concerning sexual orientation, she stated that in Catholic schools she stated, "being gay was not acceptable in society. In fact, it was frowned upon and if you engaged in such acts, you were publicly

embarrassed and disgraced and punished.” Jael also said, “ they didn't talk about it, but it was such a taboo subject. He just didn't talk about it at all.”

The participants expressed their relationship to religion by describing their church involvement throughout the course of their life from young children to adulthood, the messages they heard about from their church or families growing up, and the ways they view the Bible now that they are working toward or have achieved affirmation of themselves through Christianity. By being deeply enmeshed in church culture, be it through attending services, actively participating in services, or going to religious schools, all of the participants experienced negative messages from Christian churches or people in their upbringing. The tension of growing up in a religion, church, or family that condemned them caused a half of the participants to think a lot more critically how they approach and interpret the Bible. Although it may not look the same for some participants, they all still maintain some type of relationship to religion be it through the creation of their own congregations, joining churches that are affirming, or affirming themselves personally even if they are in non-affirming congregations, their relationship to religion tended to remain.

### **Relationship to God**

All of the participants detailed having some level of connection with God. They all noted that even though they may not participate in organized Christian settings any longer, they do have a relationship with what they know as God.

### ***Maintaining A Connection***

Based on their responses, all of the participants expressed an inward connection to what they understood God to be. They all spoke of this inner pull to really be who they are.

Candace said she recognized it from a young age. She said early in the interview:

There was a God that I knew personally and then something else that I was being presented like, I felt like really early on, I could identify that there were kind of like two experiences that I was having. So the church experience and then sort of like a connection with the higher power.

She said that she continues to listen to that voice and it has led her to trust herself more and allowed her to live a more fulfilling life. Reggie stated that he had an experience where he heard God tell him “I know your secret” which led him to trusting that God loved him. He said that faith to him is being in nature, and helping others to learn about the love of Jesus. After being asked about the role religion played in accepting himself during his interview, he said “the religion part of it is honestly what had me suicidal because of what I was taught about it was not necessarily relationship it was religion” and finished by saying “it was my relationship that saved me. But it was the religion part of it. That had me so depressed.” Sharon shared many signs that she encountered on her journey to understanding herself as a same-gender loving woman who has a strong faith system. She said that she has a very personal view of God now. She told me:

My relationship with God never changed I talked to God like God is my homie of course is... of course my God now is more fluid; before my God was a he so now my god is whatever you know, there is no gender for my God I guess my God would two spirit I don't.. so that's what has changed my God is bigger than I can imagine and more happy for me than I thought, you know the God that I grew up with, hated me, hated who I was who I ..who I thought I was ..who I wanted to have sex with. If I wanted to have sex.. that God hated that I wanted to have sex before marriage, you know

Justin said he is currently reading “Jesus Hates Religion” and said that he is trying to unlearn the negative things he has been taught about his sexual orientation. He said he keeps hearing this voice in his head telling him “You’re fine” and when asked what he believed the voice was, he responded that he believed it was God. Mary mentioned that she recently transitioned, within the last five years from more religious to spiritual. When asked about her beliefs and spiritual practices she said:

So I think where I am right now is I'm very spiritual. I talk to God every day. Every morning, I wake up, I pray in the car, I love to sing praise and worship songs. I love worship, I enjoy going to church. I'm involved in a lot of ministries at church my daughter's involved in church, but I don't believe that religion in itself and coming to church and doing all that work, is what God is pleased with necessarily with me.

Leah noted that she wanted to get to know God for herself:

You know, I feel like it's been very pleasant because like, I feel as though I'm really taking that time to get to know him personally. And like, knowing what he feels about certain controversial topics versus what you know, you might hear so that makes a difference because I'm Just like I don't even.. want to hear them and like, I don't even ascribe that. So, like, that's not true to me, you know, like, homosexuality and all that like I've come to know for myself I think like what I think God sees it as versus like with society or people you know think it is.

Jael's relationship with God seemed similar to those above. She said "I know he's with me all the time."

There were two participants, Andre and Imani, who expressed a connection with God differently than the above by stating that they pray on occasion, but they expressed that they did not feel a need to constantly communicate with God or understand who God is. Andre spoke more about church when he was reflecting on his process of getting back into his faith:

I realized I didn't have to present or pray in a certain way. I didn't have to be a Christian in a certain way. Not one way... all roads lead to Rome here. Like there wasn't one way to be a proper Christian if that made sense? I didn't have to follow someone else's rulebook. So, I can just take what I need and slowly worked my way [back] til I felt comfortable... where it felt kind again..

He also noted that he may say small prayers here and there, but it was not a big deal for him or anything internal for him that he was navigating. Imani was the same way. She said "I may say a quick prayer during the day," but noted that was the extent of her prayer life. Although there was a time when she expressed she had a need to speak with God often because she was angry with God for how God made her (woman), she has decided that most things in the world are up to luck and that God is working "on another project somewhere else." Whether participants are

wrestling with God, speaking with God regularly, or on occasion, they have all maintained a connection to the divine.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study allowed for an extensive look into the ways Black LGBTQ Christians raised in a non-affirming family make meaning of faith if they were raised in a non-affirming family. It also offered insight about the ways in which participants' upbringing and meaning making process impacted how they viewed themselves. The research questions were:

- How do Black LGBTQ Christians raised in non-affirming Christian homes and communities make meaning of faith?
- How does that meaning making process impact their sense of self?

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 people within the Black LGBTQ Christian population. This study showed that the ways the participants made meaning of faith was relational and included the relationships they have with themselves, others, religion, and God. The findings demonstrated a nuanced and complex association between the themes of relationship to self, other, religion, and God.

### **The Interplay of Relationship to Religion and to Self**

In their upbringing, many participants expressed that they were heavily involved in the church. Although their experiences were complicated, most spoke fondly of their experiences. Even for the ones who were not very heavily involved in their church environments, they mentioned still going routinely regardless. This is consistent with Dahl & Galliher's (2012) finding that showed LGBTQ youth in their study were behaviorally engaged with church early in their sexual and religious identity development.

All of the participants expressed that they heard negative messages in their upbringing about the LGBQ community during their involvement with the church in their youth. Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, and Young (2016) stated that for many Christians in Black churches, pastors are seen as messengers for God. They asserted that since pastors in Black churches interpret scripture that seems to condemn homosexuality as doing such, their congregations understand membership in the LGBQ community as a choice. In this study, I found many examples of the rhetoric the participants heard in their upbringing that exemplified their pastors' interpretation of sexual orientation as a choice. I also found other examples, however, where participants mentioned the LGBQ community was "never spoken of" which is consistent with the findings of other scholars who mentioned how taboo it is to speak about sexuality in the Black church (Chaney & Patrick, 2011; Coleman, 2008; Quinn, et al., 2016; Moon, 2014). My analysis is in alignment with Dahl & Galliher's (2012) assertion that sexual identity development in LGBQ youth is complex for youth raised in a non-affirming Christian context. The messages participants heard in their upbringing was essential to answering the question of how they made meaning of faith. The rhetoric with which they were inundated and indoctrinated in their youth – some participants still being considered youth – was harmful. For the participants, being raised in non-affirming environments, whether overtly or covertly, proved to be harmful to their relationship to themselves. They tended to internalize these negative messages about membership in the LGBQ community. Religious-related guilt and feelings of inadequacy are two of the four negative outcomes Dahl & Galliher (2012) found for young Christians raised in non-affirming contexts. Although their work was primarily with members of Latter-Day Saints denominations, the same was true for the participants I interviewed.

Examining the many statements about self-loathing from participants, there are evident overtones and implications that their feelings of being wrong, bad, and overall not okay with who they are were rooted in their understanding of their sexual orientation and how it conflicted with their religious beliefs. Most participants stated that at some point in their journey of making meaning of faith while understanding or coming to terms with their sexual orientation they were uncomfortable with their identity. This was reflected in the subordinate theme of self-loathing. Dahl & Galliher (2012) found that internalized homophobia was associated with depressive symptoms and feeling worthless. Participants recalled asking God to “make them normal” and feeling as if they were “an abomination” both of which are things that were taught to them by an institution or people in which they put a lot of trust. Goodrich and Trahan (2015) found that participants in their study who were involved in the African-American Baptist church impacted their decision to come out to their families. Participants in their study either delayed coming out for fear of rejection based on their religious understanding or felt as if they needed to appear to be heterosexual. Although the participants in my study were from a variety of traditions, based on the data, my participants had similar experiences. The impact this indoctrination had on Black LGBTQ Christians who participated in this study is evidenced by Justin saying that he feels bad because he learned being gay was bad in church and at home. Candace willingly participated in conversion therapy, which was also a result of what she learned about LGBTQ identities growing up. The connection between relationship to religion and relationship to self are exemplified by this finding. Due to religious messaging, for example things that participants heard like being gay is demonic, all gay people are going to hell, or not hearing anything about LGBTQ identities or relationships at all in church due to how taboo it was, participants believed they were inherently flawed and needed to be changed.

Throughout their lives, participants had very different experiences with how they related to themselves. This is important because the way a participant viewed themselves was impacted by how they were viewed by the people with whom they were in relationships. The ways participants related to themselves, oftentimes informed by their relationship to religion, was also important because it typically impacted the way they interacted with what they understood as God. The subordinate themes of self-loathing and self-acceptance are in alignment with previous findings from other scholars (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013; Gattis, et al., 2014; Lassiter, 2015; Garrett-Walker & Torres, 2017). However, the subordinate theme of an uncertain relationship with oneself was not very prevalent in the literature reviewed for this study. There was a gap in the literature in terms of the practice of reconciliation of sexual orientation and faith and people who are currently in a reconciliatory process. Scholarship tends to be focused on individuals who have reconciled or who don't accept themselves as members of the LGBTQ community rather than people who may be in the midst of determining how they feel about themselves. This is a key gap that my study addresses. Three of my participants expressed complex feelings of uncertainty about their identities as Christian and LGBTQ. The participants expressed that at times they did not feel like valid human beings, and that it was hard for them to come to an understanding of themselves that was favorable. Since all three of the participants who were uncertain about how they felt about themselves were raised in non-affirming homes and constantly experienced an invalidation or condemnation of their identity, it makes it a little easier to understand why they may have a hard time forming feelings about themselves. As noted in the results section, these individuals were moving more toward self-acceptance which is evidenced by their quotes.

## **Understanding the Relationship to Others, Self, and Religion**

This study demonstrated the importance of familial and church, or religious, affirmation for Black LGBTQ Christians, to ensure they can develop a positive sense of self. Results from one study demonstrated that if a participant disclosed their sexual orientation as a part of their sexual identity and development, their experience was more positive than if they were outed which could lead to separation from their families (Goodrich & Trahan, 2015). Participants in my study who were out shared their identities willingly with the people with whom they were in relationship, on their own time. That led to them being able to have more control over navigating their familial response. This supports the idea that the experience is more positive when disclosure of sexual orientation is done willingly and as a part of self-realization. For example, when Naomi decided to tell her family she was a lesbian, although she did have to navigate negative comments, she was able to stand her ground. She did stop talking to her grandmother for an extended period of time due to the fact that her grandmother was not respecting her identity and continuously tried to tell her it was sinful. Sharon experienced her dad as receptive and her mom was in denial, but through standing firm in her identity, her parents started to come around. Reggie said that his parents never stopped loving him, and since he had their support, it didn't matter to him what other people may have said. Comparing participants who did not have the same amount of acceptance and control over the response of their family of origin to Reggie, Sharon, and Naomi who did have such control, the importance of affirmation for Black LGBTQ Christians from their families is exemplified.

Inversely, being in relationship with people who condemned or refused to understand their identities, or if they believed they are in relationship with people who would do so, proved to be detrimental to the participants' sense of self and their faith journey. Many participants in

the study stated that they experienced rejection from their families whether it was being kicked out, being prayed for because they were possessed with demons, having conversations with adult figures who said God believes it's wrong to be LGBQ, experiencing an invalidation of identity by asking a bisexual child to marry a man, or withdrawing from being in intimate relationship with a parent. Participants who were not out, whether to family or certain friends, noted that it was because of their fear of how those people would react due to their beliefs from church about the LGBQ community. Two participants, Andrea and Justin, expressed fears of being outed during their interviews. It was largely for their safety and so that they still would have relationships with their families of origin and, for Justin, his spiritual community. As Goodrich and Trahan's (2015) research demonstrated, if a Black LGBQ person's family has a negative view of the LGBQ community and that person is outed, this outing can be detrimental to the family relationship. This can even cause the family and the LGBQ individuals to sever their relationship for an extended period of time (Goodrich & Trahan, 2015). My research showed the very real fear that the participants had of abandonment from their religious and spiritual communities as well as the fear of being ostracized from their family of origin. The fear of losing family and community is so deeply ingrained that two participants talked about the death of a parent as a potential fix to the internal turmoil they experienced. Justin mentioned that he may feel better about his sexual orientation if his mom died and she did not know and Imani talked about being able to be free to do whatever she wanted since her parents are not alive. This study showed that relationships with others impact the relationship the participants had with themselves.

It is not a surprise that the most of the young people in the study as well as one older person have not disclosed their sexual orientation to some of the people closest to them. Pastrana

(2016) found that family support, the importance of seeing sexual orientation as an important part of identity, and connection to the LGBTQ community are the biggest predictors of outness in Black LGBTQ people. It is important to note that participants varied in age, between 18-43. Younger participants felt some inherent physical and emotional danger of disclosing their sexual orientation to their families. They could lose familial support, be disowned, or lose financial support. For example, Jael had a dangerous experience of almost losing her housing after she disclosed. And age is not the only factor in whether participants felt comfortable disclosing. Imani and Mary are older, but did not disclose their sexual orientation because they were afraid of discrimination from their employers. The six participants who disclosed their sexual orientation to their families and are open about it in all aspects of their lives expressed that they were independent when they did so. These participants also named that it was a struggle for them to live authentically in their youth if they had even realized their sexual orientation at that age. This analysis is not to say that “outness” is a measure by which the Black LGBTQ Christians meaning-making process is to be measured. However, according to Henry (2013) higher levels of outness in LGBTQ people in her study was associated with better psychological well-being, including higher self-esteem. Riggle, et al. (2016) found that higher levels of authenticity in their participants was associated with better psychological outcomes as well. The ways the participants felt about themselves is a factor in their meaning-making process which is why the conversation about disclosure is important.

In addition to maintaining and cultivating good relationships with their families of origin, participants also either had or wanted what I called “found family” in this study. Goodrich & Trahan (2015) found that identifying with other LGBTQ individuals allowed participants to fully embrace their sexual identity by offering a support system which fostered an environment in

which participants were able to develop a clearer sense of self. I found evidence of this in the ways the participants talk about the community they have found or expressed a desire to find. Reggie had a roommate who brought him back to church after a long hiatus, Sharon had a mentor who had a similar lived experience as hers and was still living life as Christian while making strides to make change to the ways the religion was used within her sphere of influence, Jael talked about being in community with queer and transgender people of color who had similar upbringings, Naomi found a group of Black affirming Christians with whom she fellowships regularly, and Candace and Mary carefully curate their connections which allows for them to be surrounded by people who affirm their identity. As womanist theorist and theologian Monica Coleman (2008) affirms, in order to make meaning of faith, Black LGBTQ Christians must have someone or a group of people with whom they can be their authentic selves and be affirmed while doing so.

The relationships that the participants had with others, whether it was their family of origin or their found family, showed that how they were seen by the people with whom they were in relationships influenced the way they saw themselves. It also influenced the way they thought about God. Monica Coleman (2008) asserts that a person cannot “live, change, or become in isolation (Communal Context, paragraph 5)” and insists that salvation is a communal experience. She also notes that “combating evil, fighting injustice, resisting violence, questing for wholeness and health” are not about what one person does, but is a communal activity. My research affirms this, and participants noted that they were best able to resist violence and search for wholeness and health when they were in community with people who affirmed their identity.

In addition to having this community in their found family, five participants found community with their current church. Many participants chose to leave the churches and

denominations of their upbringing and either fellowship in affirming congregations, create their own places of fellowship, or stop attending church altogether. There were many participants who noted that they took some time away from church. Although they gave varying reasons, being able to distance themselves from harmful rhetoric and people was beneficial for their faith development. This is consistent with Lassiter (2015) who found geographic distance was beneficial during the reconciliation process. He stated that going away from their church of origin and their hometown was beneficial for Black gay Christian men. Dahl & Galliher (2012) found that disengaging religiously is a part of religious and sexual identity development which is also in alignment with the previous study. This means that for their participants, leaving their religious community for a while was beneficial for their religious and sexual identity development.

Although seven participants took a break from church, or left their homes, five of them did start attending religious services again. Candace, Jael, Leah, and Naomi were able to find affirming churches, and Sharon and Reggie have been able to intentionally curate, cultivate, and lead churches that are affirming as well. It is important to consider the sacrifice, however, that Black LGBTQ Christians who choose to attend affirming churches make. According to Winder (2015), the decision to leave the Black church as a Black LGBTQ person can be hard especially since Black LGBTQ people tend to gravitate to more “ethnic” communities, and not LGBTQ communities. Sharon, Leah, and Jael have forgone a mostly Black congregation in order to be in a place where they are not harmed spiritually. Mary and Justin, said that although they still attend churches that are not affirming, they could do so by repurposing the things that they hear or learn that seem to invalidate or demonize their identities. Mary said she does so by her thinking of herself as more religious than spiritual; she said she has an understanding of God being pleased

with her, but not because of what she learned as being religious (being in church, serving the church). Justin said he has a view of the Bible as “an interpretation” which helps with his being at his home church. This result of people staying in non-affirming churches, but still finding ways to affirm themselves are consistent with the findings in other literature where people transform theological meaning and find congregations that feel safe for them (Foster, et al., 2015; Woodell, et al., 2015).

In addition to finding community, reframing the ways they thought about the Bible was also very important to about half (6) of the participants. A few participants were taught that the Bible was the infallible word of God and are, at present, a little more curious when it comes to accepting what is in the Bible as absolute truth. The subordinate theme of the view of the Bible within the participants' relationship to religion was related to the relationship the participants had with God. Neveah mentioned feeling as though their relationship with God was on pause because they were not reading their Bible, others named it as a source of stress, and Sharon even said that if she stopped reading it, she would stop finding reasons she was going to hell. Although all of the participants mentioned have different views of the Bible than they had in their upbringing, it was evident that the Bible was something that impacted the participants' relationship with God. A previous study indicated that since pastors had the role of interpreting scripture and were seen as messengers for God, their interpretations were accepted by their congregations (Quinn, et. al., 2016). It is important to note, however, that the Catholic participants did not mention the Bible.

Through all of this religious and sexual identity navigation, all participants were able to maintain a connection to what they believe to be God. Woodell, et al. (2015) stated that finding a personal connection to a loving God is essential for reconciliation. Whether the participants

expressed their relationship in terms of deeply personal, internal experiences with this God figure. Occasional chats with God, they all maintained a connection to the Divine. From hearing voices, to internal pulls, to developing personal relationships, to wrestling with and trying to understand, to praying casually on special or specific occasions, all of the participants stated that they had a relationship with God. Since participants described these feelings and experiences as internal and personal, demonstrating the ways they saw relationship to self and relationship to God as intimately connected.

### **Understanding the Relationships to Self and God**

The six participants who were able to accept themselves as LGBTQ people of faith expressed that they feel good about themselves and try their best to see themselves the way God sees them. The responses to the question “How do you feel about yourself?” from participants who were in a place of self-acceptance were quick and confident, and often detailed their journeys to being comfortable with themselves. Oftentimes they spoke highly of themselves and their comfort level with themselves throughout the interview. Since all of these participants mentioned loathing themselves during the interview, there was a section dedicated to how they changed their self-perception in the results section. Most of the participants said that they needed to let go of what other people thought and started existing in a way that felt authentic for them. Lassiter (2015) found that in order for reconciliation to be achieved with Black gay Christian men, they had to have happiness and acceptance with themselves and that it required a sense of integrity. The way he explained a sense of integrity included the release of messages of perversion they received from others from their psyche. It also included a sense of believing God still loved them. This is in alignment with what I found for people who were able to change their self-perception. This change in self-perception exemplifies the correlation between relationship

to others and relationship to self. This finding also shows the correlation between relationship to self and relationship to God.

### **Implications**

These findings have implications for both the Black family and the Black church. For both institutions, these findings caution the condemnation of Black LGBTQ Christians. This study shows how harmful it is for Black LGBTQ Christians when they are not affirmed by their Black families. It also helps exemplify the harm the Black church can inflict on the Black LGBTQ population. If Black families are not accepting of their LGBTQ child, they run the risk of having a negative impact on how their child sees themselves and God, hindering, or unnecessarily complicating their faith development. If Black churches continue teaching anti-LGBTQ messages, with the invisible population in the congregation, they also run the risk of inflicting spiritual harm on Black LGBTQ individuals. Monica Coleman (2008) asserts that when churches and pastors condemn homosexuality, they erode the self-esteem of their LGBTQ members. Since the Black family and the Black church are so intertwined, with religious faith being cited by scholars as sustenance for the Black family (Millet, et. al. 2018), it is recommended that both institutions seriously consider the potential harm they are causing to this population with multiple marginalized identities.

There is potential for further research with this population specifically concerning their reconciliatory process. Since scholarship mainly focuses on people who have reconciled their faith and sexual and gender minority (SGM) identity or people who actively reject SGM identities and not on those in the process of reconciliation, there is potential for further research with that population specifically. In the future, researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to follow Black LGBTQ Christians' progress as they engage in the reconciliation process. There is

also an opportunity for expansion on the current study because there were no binary transgender people in the study and the genderqueer/nonbinary person did not speak much about their gender identity, only their experience with their sexual orientation in this study. Lastly, there is ample opportunity for people to study the Black LGBTQ Christian population that is not in the Southeastern United States since this study was limited in its geographic scope.

### **Limitations**

The goal of sexual orientation research according to Hammack (2005) is “to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experience as it impacts the history of individuals, cultures, and societies forever in flux” (p. 286). That being said and understanding the methodology for this research, this study was not meant to be generalizable to the broader Black LGBTQ population. It was conducted in the Southeastern United States and therefore there are geographical limitations. This study is not representative of the experiences of Black LGBTQ Christians in other parts of the country. Every Black Christian denomination is not represented in the sample; the ones represented are Church of God in Christ, Presbyterian, African Methodist Episcopal, and Missionary Baptist. Also, all of the participants in the study were college-educated which could have some impact on their meaning-making process. The limited scope of the research question also left some very rich data out of the analysis and this is not an exhaustive review as it was targeted very specifically to the family.

### **CONCLUSION**

The main findings of this study were that the meaning-making process for faith is a complex and relational endeavor for Black LGBTQ Christians. The discussion illustrated how participants' relationship to religion and to others impacted their relationship to themselves; how the relationship to others impacted their relationship to religion and the way they were in

relationship with God; how their relationship with themselves impacted their relationship with God; and how their relationship with religion impacted their relationship with God. The way participants related to themselves was deeply connected to the ways in which they related to and understood religion and others around them, and that usually impacted the way they related to God. There is variation in each story, but this was the general trend. If participants were self-loathing, or expressed desire to change, they normally didn't trust themselves, were rejected by their family, heard negative messages growing up, and still had a relationship with who they perceived God to be. For those who did not stop at loathing themselves, but learned to love themselves, they found they were able to cultivate and maintain a relationship with God, form connections with other people who affirmed their being, and were able to sift through the negative messages they heard growing up to make their own positive meaning of them. Throughout the interviews, participants gave insight into how they viewed themselves. The relationship they had with themselves was largely dependent on their relationship to religion and the relationships they had with the people around them. If participants were accepting of themselves, they navigated the negative messages they received in their upbringing in community with their found family, through changing their relationship to the Bible, and trusting themselves and who they perceive God to be enough to get to a place of self-acceptance.

The meaning making process for these participants is relational and those relationships impact their sense of self. Understanding religion as a part of a person's meaning system, allows an understanding of the connectedness of how the person conceptualizes God, and understands the nature of other humans, themselves, and the world (Silberman, 2005). This study exemplified how religion can be seen as an avenue for meaning making. It has also shown that where that religion as meaning making has wreaked havoc on the lives of these Black LGBTQ Christians,

they seem to have turned to faith — or a more general search for meaning — and still maintained a connection to a God they see as loving. Halkatis, et. al. (2009) found that many LGBQ individuals are committed to religious and spiritual life because they have a desire to make sense of their place in the world. They assert that this is especially because of social intolerance. This study has shown that Black LGBQ Christians do continue to have strong faith systems. If Black churches and Black families change in order to affirm and support their LGBQ members, there may be better psychological outcomes for this population.

## References

- Allen, S. E. (2019). Doing Black Christianity: Reframing Black church scholarship. *Sociology Compass*, 13(10). <https://doi-org.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/10.1111/soc4.12731>
- Billingsley, A., & Caldwell, C. (1991). The church, the family, and the school in the African American community. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(3), 427-440.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2295494>
- Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2017). Making the case for interpretative phenomenological analysis with LGBTGEQ+ persons and communities. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 11(4), 285-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2017.1380558>
- Chaney, C. & Patrick, L. (2011). The invisibility of LGBT individuals in black mega churches: Political and social implications. *Journal of African American Studies*, 15, 199-217.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-010-9153-y>
- Coleman, M. (2008). A Communal Theology: Loving the Way. In *Making a Way out of No Way*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Incorporated.
- Dahl, A. L. & Galliher, R. V. (2012). LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised within a Christian religious context: Positive and negative outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35, 1611-1618. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.07.003>
- Dahl, A. & Galliher, R. V. (2012). The interplay of sexual and religious identity development in LGBTQ adolescents and young adults: A qualitative inquiry. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 12(3), 217-246.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2012.691255>

- Dollahite, D.C., Marks, L. D., & Dalton, H. (2018). Why religion helps and harms families: A conceptual model of a system of dualities at the nexus of faith and family life. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *10*(1), 219-241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12242>
- Douglas, K. B. (1999). Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community. In *Sexuality and the Black Church* (pp. 87–108). New York: Orbis Books.
- Foster, K. A., Bowland, S. E., & Vosler, A. N. (2015). All the pain along with all the joy: Spiritual resilience in lesbian and gay Christians. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *55*, 191-201. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9704-4>
- Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Ganzevoort, R. R., van der Laan, M. & Olsman, E. (2011). Growing up gay and religious: Conflict, dialogue, and religious identity strategies. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *14*(3), 209-222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670903452132>
- Garret-Walker, J. J. & Torres, V. M. (2017). Negative religious rhetoric in the lives of black cisgender queer emerging adult men: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *64*(13), 1816-1831. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1267465>
- Gattis, M. N., Woodford, M. R., & Han, Y. (2014). Discrimination and depressive symptoms among sexual minority youth: Is gay-affirming religious affiliation a protective factor? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *43*, 1589-1599. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0342-y>
- Trahan, D. P., & Goodrich, K. M. (2015). “You think you know me, but you have no idea”: Dynamics in African American families following a son’s or daughter’s disclosure as LGBT. *The Family Journal*, *23*(2), 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480715573423>

Halkitis, P. N., Mattis, J. S., Sahadath, J. K., Massie, D., Ladyzhenskaya, L., Pitrelli, K., . . .

Cowie, S. E. (2009). The meanings and manifestations of religion and spirituality among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults. *Journal of Adult Development, 16*(4), 250-262. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-009-9071-1>

Henry, M. (2013). Coming out: Implications for self-esteem and depression in gay and lesbian individuals. [Master's thesis, Humboldt State University].

<https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/nv935517s>

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2014). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Lassiter, J. M. (2015). Reconciling sexual orientation and Christianity: Black same-gender loving men's experiences. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture, 18*(5), 342-353.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1056121>

Lightsey, P. (2015). Black Women's Experiences and Queer Black Women's Lives. In *Our Lives Matter* (pp. 1–13). Oregon: Pickwick Publications.

Masci, D., Mohamed, B., & Smith, G. A. (2018, April 23). Black Americans are more likely than overall public to be Christian, Protestant. Pew Research Center; Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/23/black-americans-are-more-likely-than-overall-public-to-be-christian-protestant/>

Millett, M.A., Cook, L. E., Skipper, A. D., Chaney, C. D., Marks, L. D., & Dollahite, D. C.

(2018). Weathering the storm: The shelter of faith for Black American Christian families. *Marriage & Family Review, 54*(7), 662-676.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2018.1469572>

Moon, D. (2014). Beyond the dichotomy: Six religious views of homosexuality. *Journal of Homosexuality, 61*(9), 1215-1241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.926762>

- Neal, J. W., & Neal, Z. P. (2013). Nested or networked? Future directions for ecological systems theory. *Social Development, 22*(4), 722-737. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12018>
- Pasquale, T. B. (2015). *Sacred wounds: A path to healing from spiritual trauma*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.
- Pastrana, A. Jr. (2016). It takes a family: An examination of outness among black LGBT people in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues, 37*(6), 765-788. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x14530971>
- Quinn, K., Dickson-Gomez, J., & Young, S. (2016). The influence of pastors' ideologies of homosexuality on HIV prevention in the black church. *Journal of Religious Health, 55*, 1700-1716. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0243-6>
- “Religious Composition by Sexual Orientation.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2014). <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-4-the-shifting-religious-identity-of-demographic-groups/#religious-composition-by-sexual-orientation>
- Riggle, E. D. B., Rostosky, S. S., Black, W. W., Rosenkrantz, D. E. (2017). Outness, concealment, and authenticity: Associations with LGB individuals' psychological distress and well-being. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 4*(1), 54-62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000202>
- Silberman, I. (2005). Religion as a meaning system: Implications for the new millennium. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*(4), 641-663. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00425.x>
- Vagle, M. D. (2016). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Walker, J. J., & Longmire-Avital, B. (2013). The impact of religious faith and internalized homonegativity on resiliency for black lesbian, gay, and bisexual emerging adults.

*Developmental Psychology*, 49, 1723–1731. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031059>

Ward, E. (2005) Homophobia, hypermasculinity and the US black church. *Culture, Health &*

*Sexuality*, 7(5), 493-504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050500151248>

Winder, T. J. A. (2015). Shouting it out: Religion and the development of black gay identities.

*Qualitative Sociology*, 38, 375-394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-015-9316-1>

Woodell, B., Kazyak, E., Compton, D. (2015). Reconciling LGB and Christian identities in the

rural south. *Social Sciences*, 4, 859-878. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci4030859>

**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email

Greetings,

I hope you are well! I am Tsharre Sanders, a Master's student studying Youth, Family, and Community Sciences (YFCS) at NC State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. As a part of my program, I am completing a thesis (project) under the guidance of Professors Maru Gonzalez and Annie Hardison-Moody. The topic is the interplay of religious and sexual and gender identities. Specifically, I am interested in how Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people who were raised in non LGBTQ+ affirming Christian households make sense of their faith and sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In order to get an answer to this question, I want to talk to LGBTQ+ Black Christian people to gain insight into their experiences. The interviews will be semi-structured and will last between 1.5 to 2.5 hours. If you choose to participate and complete the full interview, you will be compensated with a \$30 gift card. Your participation in this research is voluntary, confidential, and it is your right to stop participation in this research at any point.

If you or someone you know may be interested, please complete this google form <<https://forms.gle/rWRsz6c2f8VgJW5X6>>. Information in this google form will only be shared with Tsharre Sanders, the researcher on this project.

*\*Once a participant indicates interest to be in the study via completing this google form (housed in a secure NCSU google drive) I will contact them as they have requested. If via email, the email will be generic and provide no information about the study.*

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

**North Carolina State University**

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

**Title of Study:** Making Religion Work: How Black LGBTQ+ Christian Youth Reared in Non LGBTQ+ Affirming Congregations Make Sense of Their Faith & Themselves

**Principal Investigator:** Tsharre Sanders, [trsande2@ncsu.edu](mailto:trsande2@ncsu.edu), (919) 333-7304

**Faculty Point(s) of Contact:** Maru Gonzalez, [mgonza22@ncsu.edu](mailto:mgonza22@ncsu.edu), (919) 515-9269

Annie Hardison-Moody, [amhardis@ncsu.edu](mailto:amhardis@ncsu.edu), (919) 515-8478

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black LGBTQ+ people who were raised in non LGBTQ+ affirming Christian homes and communities. Through semi-structured interviews, I hope to gain an understanding of how Black LGBTQ+ people make sense of faith and how they feel about themselves.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because you want to share your experience and help your church, family, and community grow towards inclusivity. You may not want to participate in this research because it could cause you to confront emotional trauma. Other people may be able to identify you from the research data; however, the chance is small because all identifying information about you will be redacted from any published material and you will give permission about the information that will be published about you.

In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. If you would like, a copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office (contact information is noted below).

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to learn more about how Black LGBTQ+ people who currently identify as Christian but who were raised in non LGBTQ+ affirming Christian households or communities make sense of their faith and how they feel about themselves.

#### **Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**

There will be approximately 12-14 participants in this study.

In order to be a participant in this study you must be Black, LGBTQ+, raised Christian, and currently identify as Christian.

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to be interviewed by the researcher for roughly 1.5 hours to 2.5 hours.

If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to being audio recorded. If you do not agree to being audio recorded you cannot participate in this research.

### **Risks and benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. You will be asked to not use your own name or the names of others in your interview to protect their privacy.

There is a small chance that you may be re-identified by those who know you by the information that you share with the researcher. This could risk your job, relationships with family and friends, and/or affect your access to medical care if your identity is known publicly. The researcher will destroy all records that contain your name or contact information once the interview is transcribed as well as changing any identifying details so that it will be very hard to identify you and very likely to occur; however, it is still a risk you should consider before participating in this research.

This research will ask you to reflect on spiritual trauma and post-traumatic growth. You may feel uncomfortable or have a range of emotions to some of the questions that I may ask. Please tell me if you feel uncomfortable. You can decline to answer any questions that I ask or to stop participating at any point. In rare cases, I may choose to end the interview early for your own well-being because I am not a licensed mental health professional and this research is not a substitute for therapy. Given that the topics we will talk about are sensitive and personal, I will be providing all participants with a list of supportive resources in case participants find them useful after our interview together.

Your name and contact information will be kept separately from your interview information. All data about you will be stored with encryption. Your name, contact information, and any directly identifying information will never be published or shared without your consent. Any data with identifying information about you will be securely and permanently destroyed once the interview is transcribed. Any files kept will not have any information that can be directly linked to you.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are contributing to the broader field of knowledge of the personal experiences of Black LGBTQ+ people in non-affirming Christian households and communities and how those experiences shape their sense of self, community, and the Sacred.

### **Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time. To stop your participation, tell the researcher at any point in the process.

If you revoke your participation before the data is published, your data will be excluded from the research pool and permanently destroyed. If you revoke consent after publication of the data, your data will be excluded from future use, but cannot be redacted from the original publication.

### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. All identifying information will be kept securely and confidentially on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher and the research team. Any published or shared material will have all of your identifying information such as name and email removed. Individual data with identifiable details removed may be made available to the public using code names or pseudonyms as required by a professional association, journal, or funding agency.

Please note, there are a few instances in which confidentiality may be broken. I am a mandated reporter in the state of North Carolina. This means that if you share with me instances of child or elder abuse or neglect during our interview together, I am obligated to break confidentiality and report this information to the appropriate authorities. Similarly, if you are an imminent deadly threat to yourself or another person, I must also report that.

### **Compensation**

Participants will be compensated with a \$30 gift card at the completion of their scheduled interview.

### **What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Tsharre Sanders, at (919) 333-7304.

### **What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) Office via email at [irb-director@ncsu.edu](mailto:irb-director@ncsu.edu) or via phone at 1.919.515.8754. You can also find out more information about research, why you would or would not want to be a research participant, questions to ask as a research participant, and more information about your rights by going to this website: <http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant>.

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Before we begin, while I am interested in learning about your experiences and what you learned as a result of it, I am asking that in sharing this information with me, I request that you not share any identifying information about the people or places wherein your experiences occurred. For example, you can say “my mother said \_\_\_\_” or “My pastor stated \_\_\_\_” but please do not name of your mother, pastor, or the place you attended church.

Does that make sense? Do you have any questions before we begin? (answer questions. Once done, turn on audio-recorder)

How old are you?

How do you identify in terms of gender and sexual orientation?

What was your experience with religion and faith like growing up?

- What type of church did you attend and what denomination was it?
- Who was in leadership (gender)?
- What messages did you hear about LGBTQ+ people in sermons?

What was your experience with your sexual orientation and/or gender identity like as you grew up?

- When did you first “know” you were not in the majority when it came to your feelings about who you wanted as a partner and/or how you needed to express your gender?
- Was your family accepting and/or how did your family dynamic change?
- Can you describe your internal coming out process?

What is your experience with religion and faith like now?

- Are you a member of a church? If so, what denomination? Were you ever not attending church? If so, for how long and what led you back?
- To what extent are the pastors and congregants at your current church affirming?
  - What is the racial makeup of the church you currently attend?
- How were you able to reconcile your past teaching with what you presently believe? What is different and what has remained the same?

How do you personally make meaning of faith? What does faith look like for you and in what types of practices do you engage?

How do you feel about yourself?

- Do you feel like you love yourself, like yourself, accept yourself, tolerate yourself or hate yourself? Are you somewhere in the middle?
- Does religion play a role in how you see yourself? If yes, how? If no, why not?

- Does your sexual orientation play a role in how you see yourself? If yes, how? If no, why not? How have your feelings about yourself changed with regard to your sexual orientation since you first started living in a way that feels authentic to you?
- Does your gender identity play a role in how you see yourself? If yes, how? If no, why not? How have your feelings about yourself changed with regard to your gender identity since you first started living in a way that feels authentic to you?
  - What does the interplay of religion and sexual orientation and/or gender identity look like for you in figuring out how you feel about yourself - if it comes into play at all?

Based on past teaching on religion and sexual orientation/gender identity and current knowledge, how do you form your feelings about yourself?

Can you detail your journey to self-acceptance for me (if there has been one and you are in a place of self-acceptance)?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

## Appendix D

### Codebook

#### **Code: Perception Self**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of text, participants are illustrating the frustration and fear they feel in being their authentic selves. They are expressing how they feel about themselves and how they believe others will perceive them.

Examples:

GM1: I still don't fully accept myself as because a part of me is just like, what if this is a phase? And it goes away? Like, that'd be great. Kind of not just like, you know, I like liking guys, which is weird to say, and I don't know why.

QW2: I think it's beautiful ..So yeah, I think it makes me love myself more.. realizing how unique and how...yeah just how unique I am. I mean, like I see myself in a much better light I don't think of myself as like a liar or like a fraud.

Cross code: perception other

#### **Code: Perception Other**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of text, participants are illustrating the danger they feel is inherent in being their authentic selves with their families. This could manifest as rejection, invisibility, or violence from their family.

Examples:

LW1: My mother is 77 years old; she is not with this program at all.

LW3: So honestly for me because my mom meant so much to me. I had to deal with what really would my mom think about this?

Cross code: perception self

#### **Code: Found Family**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of text, participants are expressing their joy/gratitude for having folks in their lives (having community) where they feel seen/known/accepted.

Examples:

BW2: I think that like the actual picking up and moving, from where I live like away made a difference and I think that like coming to college and meeting those people that I like yearned for when I was younger, made a difference. So like, I have a lot of people in my corner like I just didn't have that when I was younger. So like, I feel like it got much better

Cross codes: Going away, perception other

#### **Code: Personal Relationship with God**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of texts participants' statements seem to illustrate their need to have a relationship with God aside from the one they learned in their home families/communities or what's been prescribed for them.

Examples:

QW2: "There was a God I knew personally and then something else that I was being presented. I felt early on there were two experiences I was having"

GM1: "No, I don't read the Bible every day, but for me it's a personal thing.... It's more about the relationship and how you treat people"

### **Code: Going Away**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of text, participants express how important it was for them to get away or how once they were away, they were able to live as their authentic selves.

Examples:

LW3: "I chose a college miles away where I was going to go and live my gay life." "I didn't start until I came from that country to the United States. I decided it was finally time."

LW2: "I didn't start exploring my sexuality until I moved here" "The freedom to explore wasn't there and because of who I was, the opportunity never would have presented itself"

GM1: "so when I go back home, I revert back for 1) because they can't know I'm gay"

### **Code: Messages Heard Growing Up**

Definition/When to Use: In these lines of text, participants detail the messages they heard growing up about the LGBTQ community, this is important because it had the potential to shape how they approached accepting themselves as a member of the community and even how they approached their faith as their life has progressed.

Example:

SGLW1: They were always preaching about saying it's Adam and Eve, Steve. They would also say a lot about homosexuals and stuff and I really didn't know what homosexual was as a kid, as a child until they started you know, breaking it down, Adam and Steve, um, saying men shouldn't be with men, women shouldn't be with women