

All Are Welcome: Inclusion and Mainline Protestantism in the United States

by

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Dedication

To pastors, parents, and chosen family who love and welcome extravagantly.

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List of Acronyms

BCP – Book of Common Prayer

ELCA – Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

ESV – English Standard Version

MCC – Metropolitan Community Church

MLP – More Light Presbyterians

NRSV – New Revised Standard Version

ONA – Open and Affirming

OPC – Orthodox Presbyterian Church

PCUSA – Presbyterian Church (USA)

PPC – Poor People’s Campaign

PRRI – Public Religion Research Institute

RLS – Religious Landscape Study

TEC – The Episcopal Church

UMC – United Methodist Church

UCC – United Church of Christ

Abstract

All Are Welcome: Inclusion and Mainline Protestantism in the United States focuses on LGBTQ+ inclusion in church life and ministry in Christian congregations that belong to mainline Protestant denominations. Mainline Protestants have been historically viewed both as progressive in their attitudes on social issues like LGBTQ+ equality and as the most “mainstream” of American faith groups, although their cultural influence and membership have waned in recent decades. I explore how queer people advocate for themselves by intervening in debates about theology, community, and language in these congregations, and how belief and practice are reconciled with inclusive actions at the local level. While mainline congregations possess the potential to be uniquely transformative spaces by welcoming queer people, they are also volatile crucibles beset by internal conflict and debate about what queer inclusion looks like. Institutionally, these congregations have both the capacity and the resources to help alleviate prejudice and help queer folks heal. But they also sometimes offend, underserve, or reinforce systems of LGBTQ+ exclusion. I delve into how LGBTQ+ individuals work within congregations to make their communities more accepting, thereby becoming agents in religious meaning making in ways that have important ramifications for our understanding of LGBTQ+ religiosity and agency.

Queer mainliners not only participate in their churches’ ministries, but they also build relationships with each other and with heterosexual/cisgender congregants, disrupting the boundaries of who belongs in Christian worship spaces. Many scholars have neglected both LGBTQ+ Christians and mainline Protestants as topics of study because of the prominent role

“conservative” Christian groups (e.g., evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants) play in LGBTQ+ exclusion, and due to assumptions of LGBTQ+ identity and Christianity being mutually exclusive. Compared to the treatment of LGBTQ+ people by those conservative groups, finding welcome (or at least an openness to debate) is not at all a typical experience LGBTQ+ people have with religious institutions. I offer an analysis of what is Christian about mainline debates, policies, and processes of inclusion, areas of focus where scholarly attention is not only feasible, but vital. Such analysis is critical to understanding queer politics in the United States and the ways in which queer people of faith influence theology and religious praxis.

This dissertation is grounded in two years of ethnographic fieldwork in three Michigan congregations from different mainline denominations: The Episcopal Church, The Presbyterian Church (USA), and The United Church of Christ. By examining queer participants and affirming non-queer congregants in these institutions, I build on existing studies of queer activism and policy making in religious bodies, histories of Christian attitudes towards queerness, and ethnographies of individual congregations in the midst of division or disagreement. Studies of religious conflicts often focus on traditionalist members, who are often more vocal/forceful than their progressive counterparts. These studies thus downplay the complex negotiations by affirming church members to make faith communities inclusive to LGBTQ+ people. I concentrate on the interventions of supportive congregants, queer and non-queer alike, to uncover the agency and religious motivations people of faith employ in changing their institutions. In highlighting these actions, I place particular emphasis on queer contributions to church policies, and how queer members build and express their religious beliefs and commitment to their churches.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 The Words of the Gospel at the Base of their Soul

“Every Sunday morning for a month I would get out of my car, walk up to the church door, have a panic attack, and go home, because I was too scared of what they’d do when they found out I was gay.” We sat in Meredith’s SUV, looking out onto the front lawn of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church. A few snowflakes hit the windshield and quickly melted away. The bright red doors to the sanctuary opened and closed as parishioners walked in, wrapped in heavy coats and scarves to keep out the Michigan cold. Meredith remained seated, since the service was still fifteen minutes from starting, and she had more to tell me. She brushed a few strands of brilliant fuchsia hair out of her eyes. Back then, she told me, she had just had her fiftieth birthday. She was battling a serious illness that required intense treatment, had gone through several breakups in quick succession, and was in danger of losing her home. She was estranged from her family at the time, but having been a faithful Roman Catholic in her youth, she thought a welcoming faith community might stand in for her relatives in her dire situation.

I had been thinking more and more about where I wanted my life to go. Fifty was a sort of turning point. I stopped being afraid. I was never bashful about being out, but that need for religion got covered up by lots of other things. College, money, all that kind of stuff. That need to connect on a deeper level came back.

The day she finally went into St. Michael’s, she was filled with trepidation, standing on the sidewalk in front of the building and staring at the doors.

When I was hesitant, Hannah [another church member] stopped and introduced herself. And I said ‘This is my first visit here.’ And she just took over and led me, and I felt very welcomed immediately. I had come two or three weeks in a row, and each week, someone new came up and said ‘Welcome! We are glad to see you back!’ Not pushy, not overwhelming, just very pleasant. I was in recovery from health treatments and not fully back to health, so that was a very rewarding thing to have. That has been eight years ago now.

As she spoke, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, June and Penny, a same-sex couple who lived in the next town to the west, walked up the steps of the church, helping June’s elderly mother. Meredith chuckled, gesturing to the couple, saying that she really had had nothing to be nervous about St. Michael’s welcoming her as a lesbian. But on those first few furtive drives to the building, she really was unsure how she would be received if she built up the courage to enter the church. She eventually went through the red doors once, then again, then weekly.

For the first six months, I had at least one part of the service where I would just not be able to contain my tears. I was so moved by liturgy and the general feeling of wellbeing in that space. That sacred space. That holiness just swirled around me. I was really grateful to feel so at home here. I met a man who happened to be gay, and he and I became frequent ushers and best buds. And he married his partner here. The church is tiny but mighty, filled with people who are very committed to doing God’s work. There’s a core group of people here who I trust fully, that really do have the words of the gospel at the base of their soul.

She looked like she was about to cry. Tears were welling under her eyes but had not yet fallen down her cheeks. She pulled a tissue from her car’s center console and continued. She finally joined the congregation and was received into the Episcopal Church in an official ceremony led by the bishop in the diocese’s massive Gothic Revival cathedral in Detroit. Since then, she has become one of St. Michael’s most involved, enthusiastic parishioners. A testament to this was

the abrupt conclusion of her story, as she exited her vehicle and rushed through the red doors. She was bound for sacristy to don her acolyte's robe. She did not want to be late for lighting the candles that flanked the altar. After the service, she would be teaching Sunday School to the congregation's young children, while their parents enjoyed coffee hour.



Figure 1 Sunday morning, St. Michael's

As I made my way to my usual pew of St. Michael's, the organist began a soft prelude. I saw other openly queer congregants publicly and proudly in attendance, some with partners and some with children. These congregants shared Meredith's enthusiasm, and many nearly matched her significant level of involvement at St. Michael's. Like her, they too walked briskly up the front steps and through the front doors. Some moved rapidly in and out of the sanctuary, bringing

in flowers for the altar and elements of the weekly Eucharist. Or they stood at the back of the sanctuary adjusting their choir robes before the procession that would accompany the first hymn. They were part of a community to which they were initially unsure they would find access, but found through their own self-advocacy a space not just to be tolerated in, but to belong and thrive in. Many are now truly indispensable to the weekly functioning of the congregation. While this church has not always provided consistent opportunities for LGBTQ+ congregants to flourish, grow, and discern their relationship to the sacred, congregants are now working to ensure that queer folks will be able to find home and community there.

1.2 LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Mainline Protestantism

Meredith's story is one among many when it comes to LGBTQ+ people seeking membership and opportunities for participation in religious institutions. "LGBTQ+" stands for "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "transgender," and "queer." "Queer" is not used as a derogatory slur but rather as an increasingly popular catchall term which is often used interchangeably with "LGBTQ+," a trend I mirror in this dissertation. The "+" denotes members of the wider queer community on the spectrums of sexuality and gender not directly represented by a letter in the acronym. My dissertation focuses on a specific group of institutions, mainline Protestant churches in the United States, and how the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people manifest in their local congregations. It is an exploration of what religion does in people's lives and how it shapes people's worldviews and approaches to issues. In a more detailed sense, I explore how religion influences human interactions in the very concrete institutions to which Christians belong. Belonging to a mainline Protestant church involves just as much discernment of what one wants religious institutions to do for them, and, in turn, how to contribute to these institutions, as it does discernment of one's place in the cosmos. The results of these discernments differ among

individual practitioners. Not only are these politically mixed groups of Christians from a variety of backgrounds and socioeconomic classes, but they are also diverse in their approaches to beliefs and theology. Yet they share a common love and care for the church, and want it to endure.

In mainline Protestant denominations, from the local churches to the national conferences and gatherings, issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression have been actively discussed and debated for decades. These discussions manifest in terms of concrete actions and practices in many mainline congregations. These congregations are working to actively cultivate spaces that affirm marginalized Christians like Meredith, who have been previously excluded, shamed, bullied, and vilified in other churches. Despite histories of rejection by churches, LGBTQ+ people advocate for themselves in mainline Protestant congregations and intervene in churchwide debates about theology, community, and language. As belief and practice are reconciled through inclusive actions, or through conflicts and disagreements that prevent or stymie such actions, mainline churches must contend with ideologically diverse memberships and a complicated legacy of cultural hegemony that is now giving way to a sense of “decline.” Individual members – which I will also refer to as “parishioners,” or “congregants” – display incredible amounts of investment (in terms of money and labor) to make the church more inclusive, but a sense is growing that their churches become less nationally relevant as each year passes. Conceiving and implementing a general practice of welcome, I suggest, is not generally a steady linear process that brings Christians closer, each month or year, to a perfectly inclusive ecclesiastical space. Nor are the ways in which marginalized figures exert power and authority in religious life always pathbreaking. Processes of pushing the boundaries and finding the limits of the institutions regarding welcoming are beset

by a mix of triumphs and setbacks, by moments of reckoning, repentance, regress, or revelation. As LGBTQ+ Christians navigate how to participate in churches that are becoming more and more desirous of their presence, non-LGBTQ+ parishioners are discerning their roles and commitments as affirming “allies” and “supporters.”

While mainline Protestant denominations can be uniquely transformative and progressive spaces for welcoming queer folks, relative to the overall landscape of contemporary American Christianity, I will argue that they are also volatile spaces. They are vulnerable to internal conflicts and debates that can easily devolve into chaos, partisanship, and schism. Institutionally, the mainline churches have the capacity and resources to help alleviate prejudice and rectify harm towards queer folks. They can also offend, underserve, tokenize, and reinforce systems of maltreatment. Members go to great lengths to avoid conflict, but the constant threat of division looms as congregants discern how (and who) to welcome. As the numbers of LGBTQ+ Christians who affiliate with affirming faith communities continues to grow, the mainline churches offer a striking duality of unity and disunity. These churches have the potential to help and to harm; they can be spaces in which members find solace and fellowship, or benign neglect. In discerning shared expectations for welcoming hitherto marginalized groups, the mainline Protestant congregations act out processes that are critical to understanding how queer people of faith influence theology and religious praxis. Discussions of who should be included and why have stakes much greater than who sits in the church pew on any given Sunday morning. Gerald Creed (2006:10) writes that “...arguments about inclusion and exclusion can be appreciated as more than just issues of prejudice and culture clash. They are contests over power and the resources such power affords.” In the case of churches, the nature of power is slightly different than what Creed has in mind here. The presence and participation of LGBTQ+ people in

mainline congregations affects the ways power is distributed. But power, here, has to do with access to the “higher power” of the divine and the blessings it affords. Power involves levels of commitment to the institution relative to other members who share beliefs or practices in common. Power here concerns who can attend worship and gain institutional access to the sacred. It concerns who has access to congregational resources and social benefits of belonging to a religious group in a participatory or leadership role. Finally, it concerns who can enter into fellowship with a supportive group of members in a socially established institutions that have historically commanded respect amid the tapestry of American religiosity.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim argues that Christianity no longer arouses the zeal among adherents that it once did, writing,

Christianity’s idea of human equality and fraternity seems to us today to leave too much room for unjust inequalities. Its pity for the downcast seems to us too platonic. We would like one that is more vigorous but do not yet see clearly what it should be or how it might be realized in fact (1995:429).

Durkheim suggests that new “gods” will be born to replace those who have grown old and died, and people of faith will seek other manifestations of religion to electrify them (1995:429).

Despite this grim prognosis, Durkheim offers little evidence of what will come next, noting that it cannot yet be known (Casanova 1994). Christian debates and actions surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusion gives insight into a wholly different phenomenon than Durkheim’s prediction. Rather than the acknowledgement of inequality leading to the abandonment of the religious tradition, many Christians are working diligently to use the tenets and resources of Christianity to remedy Christianity’s problems of marginalization and exclusion. They are not satisfied with a Christianity that is beset with injustice and seek to address problems to make it stronger, or as many would frame it, more Christlike. But at the same time, they refuse to forsake the tradition

itself. In its emphasis on the delineation of the sacred from the mundane, the roles of theology and ideology among both clergy and laity, and the effects its praxis has on attitudes toward the distribution of power, Christianity is the central and indispensable core of this project. The dissertation therefore contributes most directly to the anthropology of Christianity. Over the past two decades, the anthropology of Christianity has grown substantially in scope and volume. As Joel Robbins argues in “What is a Christian? Notes toward an anthropology of Christianity,” this area of study has gone “from being an upstart to being respectable” (2014:157). Robbins’ use of “upstart” reflects the fact that anthropological attention to Christianity has been rare for much of the discipline’s history. This lack of study is striking because, as Chris Hann notes, Christianity was not only dominant in the countries where sociocultural anthropology first developed, it “continues to provide the dominant religious idiom in the countries where most practitioners live and work” (2007:383).

It has taken time for the anthropology of Christianity to gain traction as an anthropological subfield. The field of study has substantially grown, in no small part due to Robbins (2004; 2006; 2007) and Fanella Cannell (2006) arguing that anthropologists had neglected Christianity, making it peripheral to wider projects. Drawing on Susan Harding’s work among American fundamentalist Protestants, Robbins claims that Christians are ignored by anthropologists because they “challenge liberal notions of modernity most anthropologists subscribe to” (2003:192-193). Robbins also stresses the familiarity of Christianity, mirroring Cannell’s argument that anthropologists tend to forget their own “theological prehistory” (2005:352). “Christians,” he writes, “are too similar by virtue of drawing from the same broad cultural tradition as anthropologists, and too meaningfully different by virtue of drawing on a part of that tradition that in many respects has arisen in critical dialogue with the modernist ideas

on which anthropology is founded” (2003:192). Despite these considerable challenges, a broad group of scholars (e.g., Engelke 2007, Hann and Goltz 2010, Keane 2007, Meyer 2015, Veer 1996, Vilaca 2016) is now publishing work on Christian groups around the world. Each new study offers a grounded response to Gil Anidjar’s challenge that “We do not know what Christianity is, except to say it has not reached its full potential as an adequate concept” (2009:392).

The question of how to conceptualize Christianity – and, in doing so, to discern what Christianity is – brings up key tensions around the heterogeneity of groups and movements who call themselves “Christian” and any anthropological claim that can be made about them. As Robbins observes:

There are many kinds of Christianity, and when the number of different kinds is multiplied by the number of different situations in which they have been spread and the number of different cultures to which people have adopted them, it is hard to escape the conclusion that at best we are dealing with Christianities rather than Christianity, and at worst these Christianities really have rather little in common with one another. (2003:193).

Robbins acknowledges that this field of study risked becoming “object-dissolving” which would curtail the further establishment of an anthropology of Christianity. At the time he expressed this concern, the field was still nascent. But this problem has not occurred in subsequent literature. Edited volumes on Christian populations around the globe have attended to the diversity of Christianity, with one example being Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson’s *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*. The editors note that Christianity is neither stable nor singular as an object of study, then go on to relish in its diversity and the variety of forms it takes, as well as its ability to serve as a lens to view a topic like “meaning” in

various Christian contexts (2006:19). Studies of Christian institutions (Barker 2014, Hann 2014, Handman 2014, Huang 2014) have also notably explored Christianity's heterogeneity, not taking the often-complicated mixes of hierarchy or autonomy institutions are beholden to as problematic or "object-dissolving" but as a focus of study itself. A focus on institutional aspects, Penny Edgell Becker argues, allows for an understanding of religion not as sets of abstract "faith traditions" but as levels of organization (1999:206). By concentrating on "the pragmatic practices and ways of doing things that form much of the organizational and small-group culture," one can begin to better discern what holds the authority to these practices (e.g., a denominational authority or a particular set of beliefs) (Becker 1999:206).

A far more likely pitfall for the anthropology of Christianity is the assumption that certain forms of Christianity that are popular among scholars are typical or representative of Christianity writ large. Robbins senses this potential and gives the examples of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity that have attracted scholarly attention (Bergunder, Droogers, and van der Laan, Robeck, and Anderson 2010, Coleman 2015, Jenkins 2002), which threaten to overshadow other forms of Christianity. To avoid this problem, Robbins concludes, one must bring multiple forms of Christianity into comparison, looking for commonalities among them – like the division of religious meaning from non-religious meaning, as I discuss in Chapter 2 – as well as dissimilarities (2003:196-197). In "The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions," Robbins further suggests that work on Christianity must focus not only on values, cosmology, or ideology, but on Christian social institutions such as congregations and denominations (2014:162). I see this goal of a focus on institutions as complementary to a focus on comparative conversations to highlight the internal heterogeneity of Christian groups, even

though Christians so often identify themselves as part of a unified global body, referred to in the Apostles' Creed as "the holy catholic" or "the universal" Church.

The congregational and denominational comparisons Robbins recommends are still rare because certain Christian groups continue to lack anthropological attention. Hann locates these overlooked groups primarily in Britain and the United States (2007:384), and among them are some of the seemingly most familiar: "mainline," mainstream, or "oldline" Protestant denominations in North America. "Mainline Protestant" is a vague, value-laden, and assumption-driven distinction. Pew Research Center's 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study (RLS) finds that 14.7 percent of Americans identify as mainline Protestant across the country (Pew Research Center 2022). Most of these mainline Protestants worship in one of seven denominations, colloquially called the "Seven Sisters." Going from largest to smallest in official membership, they are the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Episcopal Church (TEC), the Presbyterian Church (USA), the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These denominations are neither theologically uniform nor identical in their internal structure and governance, but they are generally grouped together. According to Robert Wuthnow and John Evans (2002:4), this happens because these churches have "public elements in common," including frequent collaborations and common participation in larger ecumenical bodies like the National Council of Churches (2002:4). Collaborations between mainline denominations occur at the regional and local level as well. Mainline congregations frequently partner with other mainline churches in their municipality or region for joint service projects and charity work. They also frequently participate in ecumenical worship services around holidays like Thanksgiving or Holy Week (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday), which their

similar worship styles allow. Through these joint activities, participants in these denominations view themselves as connected in a similar way to how scholars describe them.

Wuthnow and Evans claim that mainline denominations have been viewed historically as the “mainstream” culturally established faith of the United States, constituting what Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney call the country’s *religious core* (1987:6). Though each of these scholars notes that the continuing status of mainline hegemony is increasingly in doubt, the reputation of these churches as mainstream compared to other religious movements in the United States largely endures. Mainline church buildings are a familiar fixture on the main streets of municipalities across the United States. The names of the denominations and strains of Protestantism from which they hail retain an air of familiarity, giving the institutions a sense of intransience and permanence, even if their hegemony is decreasing. Mainline Protestantism is generally associated with privileged economic classes and with participation in civic and economic life. The churches, however, have always played host to congregants from a variety of class backgrounds. The RLS reports that twenty-nine percent of mainliners in 2014 had an annual income of less than \$30,000 (Pew Research Center 2014). As the popular acronym WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) suggests, these denominations are also generally associated with people of Northern European ancestry. Pew reports the denominations are eighty-six percent white, a greater percentage than among evangelicals or Catholics (Pew Research Center 2014).

Most importantly to this dissertation, mainline denominations are commonly identified with what David Hollinger calls “the liberal side in the division that has rent American Protestantism” (2013:xiii). They compose the “liberal” pole of what William Wellman calls a “simple two-party explanation of American Protestantism:” a conservative/liberal binary

(2008:21). Identification as “liberal” does not mean that individual lay mainliners are all Democrats or have deep commitments to social justice. Mainline clergy, who gained a reputation for faith-based activism surrounding the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s, have retained a reputation of being far more politically and socially progressive than their lay members (Hadden 1969, Warner 1988). Pew’s 2014 data shows that less than half of mainliners nationally are registered Democrats, with a roughly equal number of Republicans and a significant portion of those who identify as “moderate” but are generally progressive on social issues. Pew reports that in 2014, sixty percent of mainliners believe abortion should be legal in all/most cases and fifty-seven percent strongly favor or favor same-sex marriage, exceeding percentages of evangelical Protestants, historically Black Protestants, and Catholics (Pew Research Center 2014). Fifty-six percent of mainliners believe stricter environmental laws are worth the monetary cost, also exceeding percentages of evangelical Protestants and Catholics (Pew Research Center 2014). Denominational leaderships tend to take progressive public stances on social issues in comparison to other Christian groups and are attracted to ideological positions that Randall Balmer and Lauren Winner associate with “essential optimism in human goodness” (2002:71). Rather than believing that the world is growing more sinful, and more ensnared by trouble, a tendency Balmer describes in common with evangelical theology, mainliners have traditionally believed that the world can be improved through their intervention in public life. The likelihood of mainliners taking progressive stances on social issues are a major way in which they differ from other Christians around them, though the nature of these stances has varied in scale between what R. Stephen Warner calls “positive thinking” and “prophetic outcry” (1988:15)

As Balmer and Winner argue, the binary between conservative and liberal Protestants is so stark when it comes to positions on social issues that conservatives “have more in common with... conservative Catholics than they do with liberal Protestants, who in turn are more akin to Unitarians or Reform Jews” (2002:5). Mainliners generally display greater tolerance toward non-Christian religious traditions and are often more willing to participate interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Less emphasis is placed on the individual or personal salvation of members. Fewer mainliners hold the belief that the Bible is an *inerrant* (absolutely true) document meant to be interpreted literally as the word of God. Individual points of doctrine, from the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ to the fate of humans after death (e.g., belief in heaven and/or hell), are not totally thrown aside as irrelevant, but are also more open to skepticism and questioning. Mainliners often less forcefully require or police adherence to beliefs that are “traditional” or “orthodox.” Like any binary, this liberal/conservative division of American Protestantism minimizes the heterogeneity and diversity found at each pole. It should not be assumed that all mainliners subscribe to ideological, political, and theological orientation that mirrors a conventional “liberal” point of view. Nor should an openness to how members interact with doctrine lead to an assumption that no mainliners adhere to them. Many mainliners hold orthodox Christian doctrines as central to their worldviews and let those doctrines guide daily practice. Despite mainliners’ reputation for being progressive relative to evangelical Protestant groups, mainliners remain divided on the subject LGBTQ+ rights. While many mainliners strongly support and celebrate an openness to LGBTQ+ people, there is still a lack of consensus over whether LGBTQ+ people should be allowed equal participation in mainline churches’ ministry, governance, and worship. This division is also present on a myriad of other social issues of concern. In the chapters to come, I will show how this diversity (of opinions, actions,

and motivations) is expressed in mainline congregations and in the larger denominations they represent.

Because mainline Protestants are so ubiquitous across the United States, I should begin with a question I am often asked by colleagues: “Aren’t you bored?” Mainline churches have a reputation for being unremarkable compared to other Christian groups. Like the Dutch and Indonesian Reformed adherents Webb Keane (2007:30) describes as “the least puzzling or flamboyant of Christians,” who lack “drama” and instead personify “ordinariness,” mainline Protestants are identified with the ordinary and the unmarked in the broad constellation of American religiosity. They are generally relegated to footnotes in the anthropological study of American Christianity, which disproportionately focuses on “conservatives” (evangelicals, fundamentalists, charismatics, Southern Baptists, and Pentecostals) as Protestantism’s primary and dominant iteration. A plethora of studies is dedicated to their global presence (Coleman 2015, Robbins 2004), histories (Ammerman 1990, Balmer 2006, Conkin 1997, Harding 2001, Marsden 2006), engagement with the sacred (Ammerman 1987, Biaclecki 2017, Bielo 2009; 2011, Crapanzano 2000, Csordas 1997, Griffith 1997, Luhrmann 2012), political and social engagement (Carpenter 1997, Elisha 2011, Hendershot 2004, Watt 2002), and eschatology (Sutton 2014). With so much emphasis on one pole of the conservative/liberal binary, it is easy to assume mainliners lack many of the qualities exemplified in such scholarship: complicated institutional histories, dynamic systems of belief, and notable civic engagements of their own.

It would be difficult to confirm or deny these assumptions about the “ordinariness” of mainline Protestants, however, because decidedly less scholarly consideration has been given to these Christians. Ethnographic studies of local congregations over the past decade have been even rarer. This pattern of neglect is visible in popular literatures and media coverage of

American Christianity as well. For example, the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention’s fraught debate over critical race theory, abortion, and the handling of sexual abuse within Christian institutions made national headlines, with much attention given to tensions between conservative, majority-white evangelical Protestants wishing to distance themselves from “politics” and those eager to fully embrace the Republican Party (Graham 2021, Harris 2021). Similar debates in mainline denominations, such as the Episcopal Church’s 2015 General Convention – which voted to authorize marriage rites with language that allowed same-sex unions, elected the Most Reverend Michael Curry as the denomination’s first Black Presiding Bishop, and passed a budget with a multi-million-dollar initiative for “racial justice and reconciliation”– went almost unnoticed (Schjonberg 2015, Sheridan 2015).

In spite of this lack of attention, mainline denominations serve as an example of what LGBTQ+ people can bring religious institutions, and how they challenge religious institutional heterosexism and transphobia. The intersection of LGBTQ+ people and Christianity might itself seem oxymoronic or transgressive, given long histories of oppression of queer people by Christian institutions (Talvacchia 2015). As Gary Comstock argues, this oppression is manifested both through public disapproval or contempt and by “ignoring, silencing, and obstructing the voices of gay people” (1997:16). Scholars of American Christianity have largely framed studies of LGBTQ+ people and Christianity around the “Religious Right” or “Christian Right.” They disproportionately concentrate on conservative Protestant groups that, in recent decades, have taken some of the most explicit anti-queer stances. One example is the 2017 “Nashville Statement,” which was created by the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood the at the annual conference of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (Beaty 2017, Cruz 2017). In the seventh of its fourteen articles, the authors say:

“WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption” (CBMW 2017). Article ten stipulates that even to approve of “homosexual immorality or transgenderism” is sinful (CBMW 2017). The statement has been criticized for its homophobia and transphobia, even among many evangelicals, and it has prompted many counterstatements celebrating LGBTQ+ people. Still, it reflects the views of many who identify as Christian in the United States. Its 150 signatories include many prominent leaders of evangelical Protestantism, including the then-president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Steve Gaines. An even more extreme example is the Topeka Kansas based Westboro Baptist Church, which gained national infamy for pickets at military and celebrity funerals since the 1990s. Westboro is known for its exceptionally homophobic rhetoric, often carrying large signs with antigay slurs like “God Hates Fags,” which members chant at counterprotestors. Literature on LGBTQ+ people and the Christian Right is, unsurprisingly, mostly focused on anti-queer rhetoric (Cobb 2006), efforts by conservative Protestants to stymie LGBTQ+ rights in legislative or judicial contexts (Herman 1997, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, Sands 2000), “conversion” or “reparative” therapies and the “ex-gay” movement (Erzen 2006), and the relationship between anti-queer Christian activism and LGBTQ+ activism (Fetner 2008).

While studies of LGBTQ+ people in mainline denominations are less defined by anti-queer animus, mainline congregations are still ideologically mixed, displaying ambivalence or what Arlene Stein (2001) calls “soft homophobia.” This is a belief that queer folks should have civil rights but that queer identity is not morally equivalent to a normative heterosexual and cisgender identities. The early 2000s saw an important (if not extensive) body of literature on how mainline denominations treat sexual orientation as a topic of debate. Of note in this scholarship is Wendy Cadge’s work in mainline churches in the midst of public and private strife

over same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, which leads her to argue that “Much of the public talk and action related to homosexuality has occurred in individual congregations” (2002: 277, Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007, Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). Cadge argues that mainliners have contributed to public debates over sexuality because they have been among the first public institutions in the United States to provide spaces for these debates to occur, and “legitimate[ed] positions on all sides of the issue” (2002:275,277). Stein’s work, and that of Dawne Moon (2004), complements Cadge’s focus by also focusing on disagreement and compromise at the local congregational level, rather than the national denominational level. These studies all underscore how many mainliners are either resistant to or undecided on issues of LGBTQ+ inclusion and participation. Despite being considered “liberal,” advocates of LGBTQ+ inclusion routinely encounter opposition to their viewpoints in these churches, an observation my own research supports. Studies of mainline struggles to create more inclusive churches joined a broader literature on gay and lesbian Christian spirituality and participation in Christian faith communities, which also include Roman Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical Protestant, and historically Black Protestant groups (Boisvert 2000, Browne, Munt, and Yip 2010, Comstock 2009, Gill 1998, Griffin 2006, Nugent 1983, Rudy 1997).

Because mainline denominations tend to be less hostile to LGBTQ+ people than other Christian groups, they are often mentioned in this literature. For example, Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray’s 2005 edited volume *Gay Religion* includes a chapter by Cadge on two welcoming United Methodist congregations. The complicated histories of mainline denominations and LGBTQ+ people also receive attention, with Heather White (2015) exploring the (sometimes) inadvertent connections between mainliners and an oppositional politics to gay rights through the twentieth century, and the role of mainliners in keeping the Bible a key

document in debating sexuality (a trend I discuss in Chapter 3). Melissa Wilcox (2021), Justin Sabia-Tanis (2017), and theologians like Austen Hartke (2018) expand the scope of literature on queer participation in welcoming Christian congregations by highlighting the experiences of transgender people of faith. This work contrasts studies from the early 2000s that focuses mostly on gay and lesbian Christians, with bisexuals sometimes added as well. Finally, the 2010s have seen an increase of first-person accounts by LGBTQ+ people who actively participate in church life, detailing the mix of hardships and triumphs they face. Two volumes of note that compile these stories are Bronwyn Fielder and Douglas Ezzy's *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians: Queer Christians, Authentic Selves* (2018), and Brandan Robertson's *Our Witness: The Unheard Stories of LGBTQ+ Christians* (2018).

This project weaves several of these scholarly threads together, combining a focus on conflict in the local church with LGBTQ+ experiences and challenges in being part of a translocal religious community. Queer parishioners not only participate in their churches' ministries and contribute to their perpetuation, they also build relationships with each other and with their heterosexual/cisgender pew-mates, complicating and shifting the boundaries of who belongs in the church. LGBTQ+ congregants are thus instrumental in realizing institutional change and play an important role in changing Christian institutions. The impacts of queer folks on these institutions, therefore, intensify those of LGBTQ+ people in other contexts of American life, including workplace participation (Schneider 1984), the cultivation of *chosen families* or the pursuit of marriage and parenthood/adoption rights in expanding understandings of "family" (Chauncey 2004, Lewin 1995; 2009, Weston 1997), intervention in political/economic discourses and related organizing efforts (Armstrong 2002, Escoffier 1998, Gluckman and Reed 1997, Hekma, Oosterhuis, and Steakley 1995).

This dissertation will show why mainliners are worthy of increased anthropological study and speak to intersections of LGBTQ+ people and Christianity which often go unexplored. Yet my goal is not to fill a gap in the literature to simply fill a gap. Nor is it to create more fodder for comparisons among Christian groups for the sake of comparison itself. Instead, I offer an analysis of what is *Christian* about mainliners' processes of inclusion, where an anthropological frame is not only feasible, but vital. I hope that my work will show for the American mainline churches what Keane sensed in his analysis of Protestants in Indonesia "the seeming ordinariness of the Reformed Churches may help us to see the quality of everydayness in which religion can have some of its momentous consequences" (2007:30-31). What are the momentous consequences of religion in this particular kind of Christianity? Perhaps the most significant is the investment (or labor, emotion, time, and money) that LGBTQ+ people and allies are willing to make to change aspects of these institutions, while reinforcing other aspects. In this sense, mainliners are deeply invested in the kind of reformation Keane associates with Protestantism: "The restlessness of Protestant Christianity, which today is producing new factions and denominations in an extraordinary pace, is driven by this sense of revival, restoration, and reform; however routinized the religion becomes, transformation remains a lurking possibility" (2007:50). The kinds of transformation mainline denominations undertake is not at all a typical of what LGBTQ+ people experience when it comes to religious institutions, not only in terms of official recognition but also in opportunities for belonging. What draws queer folks to these "ordinary" spaces when Christianity has a reputation of not seeking the best interests of sexual and gender minorities? What keeps them in the spaces when it becomes clear that, even in "liberal" churches, debates and conflicts over LGBTQ+ issues are manifold? When they remain, how does their presence reshape the institution of the Church, and what remains routinized?

Making sense of what makes these questions Christian questions, with Christian solutions, is a core issue I will explore in this dissertation. Therefore, a focus on mainline Protestantism is critical because it will provide a perspective on this issue which cannot be gained by repeating research on the kinds of Christian groups most favored by anthropologists. A focus on conservative, evangelical Christians who regard homosexuality and transgender identity as sins has produced a literature, and a discourse, in which these issues are treated as political, in which they must be seen as political. In this framing, LGBTQ+ people are fundamentally incompatible with the Church. Instead, they are destructive, oppositional entities. They represent outside secular forces seeking to persecute the faithful or entice them to abandon their principles. Conversely, mainline churches comprise a space where the presence and participation of LGBTQ+ people are not only framed as possible, but as “good,” wholly compatible with Christian belief. Parishioners make overtly theological arguments for affirming the dignity and worth of queer folks and making respect for queer folks a core part of their belief systems.

Because mainliners seem so “mainstream” compared to the kind of fundamentalist cultural “others” (Harding 1991) which are so often invoked in discussions of Christians and LGBTQ+ people, mainliners’ engagement with Christian belief and practice presents a problem for scholars. Analysts and scholars cannot and do not want to engage issues using overtly religious idioms, which are not considered appropriate in the public sphere. That inclusive teaching and practice related to LGBTQ+ Christians might be important in themselves can easily be sidestepped for political considerations of equality and respect. But both values of equality and respect as they have been discussed in many scholarly contexts have intensely Christian connections, transcending denomination or theological orientation. The anthropology of Christianity can provide a framework to explore the ways in which this project of welcoming and

of disrupting systems of inequality is different from other arenas in which it may take place, precisely because the project is so connected to the tenets of Christianity itself.

1.3 Research Methods

The data within this dissertation are derived from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in southeast Michigan from 2017-2019, with extensive preliminary fieldwork in 2015 and 2016. Most of my research took place in three mainline congregations, each in a different municipality (each about a one-hour drive away from the others) and each belonging to a different representative of the “Seven Sisters.” Around seventy percent of Michiganders identify as Christian, according to the RLS, with slightly over eighteen percent identifying specifically as mainline Protestant (Pew Research Center 2022). This total is consistent with national figures in the same study, although affiliation with mainline denominations is slightly lower nationally than among Michiganders, at slightly under fifteen percent of respondents. Michigan is, therefore, not out of the ordinary when it comes to the percentage of the population practicing Christianity, relative to the overall United States.

Michigan is also an advantageous location due to its reputation for ideological diversity, being an important “swing” or “purple” state over the past decade. In the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections when the state’s electoral votes went to Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden respectively. Michigan’s stance on LGBTQ+ issues has become friendlier over the past decade but is still on shaky ground between affirmation and hostility. A 2017 study from the Williams Institute at UCLA, using data from the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey, found that around four percent of Michigan’s population identify as “LGBT” (The Williams Institute 2022). Many of the freedoms LGBTQ+ Michiganders claim have come from U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex were decriminalized in Michigan

through the court's 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, and its ban on same-sex marriage was invalidated through the court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling, both of which set nationwide precedents. There is no statewide nondiscrimination law regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in Michigan, although there are several local and county-wide ordinances. Since the election of Gretchen Whitmer as the state's governor in 2018, LGBTQ+ people in all areas of the state's government employment have been protected from employment discrimination by her executive order (Michigan.gov 2021). The Michigan Civil Rights Commission argued in 2018 that LGBTQ+ Michiganders are entitled to similar protections under the state's *Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act* under the category of sex (Michigan Department of Civil Rights 2022). Whitmer signed an executive order in 2021 preventing Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) funds from being used in "conversion" or "reparative" therapy on LGBTQ+ minors (Michigan.gov 2021). Under Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, it has become much easier for Michiganders to change their gender on a driver's license or state ID card, and Attorney General Dana Nessel (herself a lesbian) has issued a formal opinion that Michiganders may change their gender on their birth certificate without gender-confirmation surgery (Michigan.gov 2021). Given this context, it is possible that when an individual church or denomination adopts its own policy to affirm or protect LGBTQ+ people, they might very well exceed the protections of the state.

Michigan has not typically been the site of scholarship on queer communities outside its larger cities. While Marlon Bailey (2013) and Roey Thorpe (1997) focus on Detroit, exploring ballroom culture and the lesbian bar scene, and Tim Retzloff (1997; 2015) explores queer communities in post-industrial Detroit and Flint, smaller communities west of the metro area have not received much attention. The Midwest has been a focus of studies of rural queer life,

including work by Scott Herring (2010) and Colin R. Johnson (2013), but scholarship on rural LGBTQ+ people has more often been conducted in “Bible Belt” states (e.g., Barton 2012, Gray 2009; 2016, Howard 1999). My research follows the lead of these scholars in de-centering the metropolis as the primacy site of queer life, and queer religiosity more specifically.

1.3.1 Selecting Field Sites

My goal for this research was to work in churches that were making a commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion and were actively implementing changes. I wanted to avoid churches that already had reputations as places where queer people can thrive. I therefore did not find field sites using the kinds of resources LGBTQ+ people often use to find affirming congregations. In Michigan, these resources are a mix of printed periodicals like *Between The Lines (BTL)* and *Pridesouce*, or online databases like the National LGBTQ Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources, Believe Out Loud, and Gay Church. These resources provide digital maps of states in which congregations that are verified to welcome LGBTQ+ people are marked with drop-pins. On the websites, one can search by municipality name or zip code, click a drop-pin labeling a church, and get information such as street address, denomination, website data, and whether the church performs same-sex weddings. In 2014 and 2015, I used these resources to find which mainline congregations had the longest histories of welcoming LGBTQ+ people. But I did so to develop friendships with clergy and lay leaders from several of those churches, to ask them what churches in their region and denomination are actively working on becoming more inclusive. Once I had leads, I did a great deal of preliminary digital research on church websites, blogs, and events pages. In 2016, I selected ten pilot sites to focus on: two TEC, three PCUSA, one ELCA, two UCC, and two UMC. I spent the next six months attending services on the weekends at these churches, as well as occasionally joining Sunday School classes and public events.

These pilot sites were eventually narrowed to the three on which I focus in this dissertation. As I narrowed down which churches best suited my research goals and were most willing to have me join them, I had many meals or coffees with parishioners to discuss details of their hopes for our collaboration. As I learned their bylaws and forms of administration, I gave formal presentations to the congregations to present my goals to as wide a swath of parishioners in each church as possible. In many ways, the congregations selected me, in that my process of building ties with them involved extensive talks with congregants, laity and clergy alike, to convey a fuller sense of what I hoped to accomplish and to determine how I should interact with church members. I wanted to ensure I did not “take” more than I “gave,” especially while working with marginalized folks in the congregations. Being mindful of the power and privilege I brought to these sites as a representative of my university was crucial; such awareness facilitated the merger of community knowledge with my training in anthropological field methodologies. By gathering feedback and discerning consensus among my interlocutors, I invited them to play a key role in structuring how I would work among them and join in church life. I used informal conversations to make decisions about my methods more of a collective endeavor, and I had official meetings with leadership in each congregation to present the resulting plan for engagement and secure to their permission for long-term fieldwork. Three congregations – St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, Nazareth United Church of Christ, and Second Presbyterian Church – became sites for the bulk of my data collection. These sites are different not only in location, membership totals, and denominational affiliation, but also in their stated missions and goals, means of designating and exercising authority, division of labor in church ministry, occupations of congregants, and relationship to their wider theological and administrative strain of Protestantism.

Despite their differences, four major commonalities between the congregations are beneficial to this project, and in understanding the churches as representative of American mainline Protestantism. First, each church either did not have an official welcoming designation for LGBTQ+ people (I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 2) or was in the process of pursuing one. This meant they did not have a years-long reputation as an LGBTQ+ friendly space. Second, each congregation had a group of openly-LGBTQ+ members who participated in church life in substantial ways, around a dozen members at Nazareth and Second Presbyterian respectively, and around fifteen at St. Michael's. In each church, there were also a few members who came out to me privately but were not out to the rest of the congregation. These queer members were part of small groups and Bible studies (Chapter 3), they took part in worship services (Chapter 4), and they joined other members in community service work (Chapter 5). Most importantly, these queer folks participated in conversations about how to cultivate inclusive space, laboring alongside their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts.

Third, while these churches had different numbers of members, they had similar demographics on the basis of age and political affiliation. A majority of members in each church, well over sixty percent, were over the age of forty-five, with a substantial portion of that percentage being over age sixty. This is in keeping with wider trends among mainline Protestants in the United States, where the median age in 2014 was fifty-two, higher than a majority of other religious traditions in the country (Pew Research Center 2014). In comparison to numbers of members from the Silent generation (1928-1945) and Baby Boomers (1946-1964), numbers of Millennial (1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-2012) parishioners are substantially lower. While the churches tended to skew a bit more towards ideologies members thought of as “liberal” or “progressive,” as is the reputation of their wider denominations, these churches also

shared the trait of being politically mixed spaces, what Leah Schade (2019) calls the “purple zone” for its mix of “red and blue:” Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Congregants in the three churches placed themselves and their fellow congregants within a left/right dichotomy. While a few in each congregation held no party affiliation, nine in ten congregants were registered with one of the two major American political parties. Viewing politics through this binary, those who called themselves “liberal” or “left” noted that they shared pews with some “right wing” congregants who had voted to put Donald Trump into office. Conservative members told me that the wider denominations they belonged to often skewed toward the “leftists” in their congregations, made manifest especially when they felt clergy had become too partisan in preaching their sermons. Congregants were aware that their churches were politically mixed, and took steps to avoid acrimony after the 2016 presidential election, and again after the 2020 presential election and subsequent January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Fourth and finally, each congregation showed an openness to having me join them in a long-term capacity and expressed enthusiasm that I would be witness to the work they were doing.

1.3.2 Site 1: St. Michael’s Episcopal Church

St. Michael’s is an unassuming white building on a quiet backstreet, with a large front yard that sets it back from the sidewalk amid a cluster of large oak and maple trees. Between its two Sunday morning services, it sees anywhere from forty to seventy-five weekly attendees. Founded in 1837, this is by far the smallest of the three churches in terms of space. The sanctuary often becomes standing-room only during high-attendance events, such as funerals, weddings, or Easter services. Much of the sanctuary is unassuming, with clear glass windows lining the walls, but the apse around the altar is surrounded by large stained-glass windows, with rich red carpet on the floor. While the original nineteenth-century sanctuary had been grander,

twentieth-century renovations lowered the height of the ceiling and simplified the design. One parishioner joked to me that the ceilings were so low on the staircase to the narrow balcony at the back of the sanctuary that they bumped their head almost every time they ascended. On the two occasions when I sat in the balcony, I too came close to hitting the ceiling. The 1879 pipe organ is the true focal point of the sanctuary. It is frequently used by musicians in the region for concerts due to its beauty and the painstaking multi-year restoration process the church authorized. A relatively small education wing adjoins the sanctuary. It consists of a sacristy, a library, two offices, a choir room, and two classrooms. Down a flight of stairs is a social hall, kitchen, and basement storage area.

The Episcopal Church (TEC) is a denomination located mostly in the United States, with a few of dioceses – ecclesiastical districts– located abroad, mostly in Latin America. Episcopalians are members of the Anglican Communion, a global interconnected communion of denominations first convened in 1867, with roots in the English Reformation when the Church of England renounced Roman Catholic oversight under Henry VIII. Growing out of the Church of England, Episcopalians formed one of the first major religious groups in British North America, what would eventually become the United States. As an episcopal polity, congregations belong to regional dioceses, which are overseen by bishops and standing committees. Diocesan conventions elect these leaders. Dioceses are grouped by region into nine provinces, under the jurisdiction of a bicameral General Convention. General Convention meets every three years, consisting of a House of Bishops and the House of Deputies. General Conventions have the power to set budgets for the denomination and delegate responsibilities for the day-to-day functioning of the provinces and dioceses between convention meetings. Conventions are responsible for liturgical texts and the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), a collection of liturgies,

prayers, and theological documents that all Episcopal Churches use to worship and instruction. The power to amend or update the BCP lies with the General Convention. The chief pastor and *primate*, the most senior bishop in The Episcopal Church, is the Presiding Bishop, who resides at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington D.C. St. Michael's belongs to the Midwest Province and the Diocese of Michigan, with its See in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Detroit, famous for its unfinished bell tower and for being the location, in 1947, of Henry Ford's funeral.

St. Michael's is an Episcopal *mission*, a type of Episcopal congregations smaller and more reliant on the diocese than a regular *parish*. In missions, a priest in charge is appointed directly by a bishop, rather than being elected by the vestry (legal representatives of the church) with the bishop's approval. St. Michael's priest, Sophia, is the *vicar* of a mission, rather than a *rector* of a parish. She goes by "Mother Sophia" to parishioners, in the same way male priests are referred to as "Father." In addition to preaching, Mother Sophia oversees the leadership board, or bishop's committee, which is to a mission what a vestry is to a parish. Six members nominated and elected by the congregation serve terms of three years, and are led by two co-Wardens. They meet monthly to manage affairs of the congregation, make decisions about the building/property and its maintenance, and work with staff. The bishop's committee also does visioning work for the future of the mission and its finances. The church employs an office manager, a Director of Christian Formation (who oversees Sunday School) and an organist who directs the church's choir. The church prides itself on two community events it holds every year, a chicken BBQ in the summer, and a cookie bake sale in the winter.

Members of the church mostly live in residential neighborhoods surrounding the building, but a few commute from up to an hour's drive away. There is no major industry or

employer, as the area is a “bedroom community” for larger cities to the east and north, and most of the congregation works in other areas. The congregation is mostly upper middle class, with high school and college degrees. The majority of those who commute to work are employed in the region’s many universities and colleges, or in healthcare as nurses, physician’s assistants, and other medical staff. Very few work in town in the small shops and boutiques that dot its main street. One couple owns a local cider mill, a favorite destination for Michiganders in the Fall season. Many members are retired, giving them more time to sit at the town’s cafes and coffee shops, or walk on a pleasant paved trail beside the nearby river. Parishioners who moved to the area within the last two decades have chosen to live there because of high property values and good public schools, but others have families who have lived there since the mid-1800s. Outside of church activities, many of the members are friends. Of all three congregations, this one was the most mixed in terms of political party affiliation, with around sixty percent of the congregation identifying as “Democrats” or “moderates,” and forty percent as “Republicans” or “conservatives.”

1.3.3 Nazareth United Church of Christ

Nazareth occupies a regal fieldstone building with a massive stained-glass rose window on its front façade. Its high steeple is centered between the two major wings of the building, the south wing being the sanctuary, and the north being the education/gymnasium complex. Built in the 1890s, is the third space the congregation has worshipped in. The first was a simple log building constructed by German immigrants to Michigan in 1833, located several miles west of the current structure. Worship was conducted entirely in German until the 1960s, although English began to be introduced around the turn of the 20th century. While this church retains deep connection to its heritage, it is the least politically mixed, with around eighty percent

identifying as “Democrats” or “moderates.” Less than twenty percent identify as “Republican” or conservative.” Since United Church of Christ has the reputation of being the most progressive of the mainline denominations, the greater portion of members on the “blue” side of the binary is not surprising.

Of the three congregations, Nazareth is also the largest by far. It numbers about two-hundred but with usually half that many attending weekly. It long predates the formation of its current denominational affiliation with the United Church of Christ, but has always possessed a Reformed Calvinist orientation popular in Germany and Switzerland, having previously belonged to another denomination, the Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R, 1934-1957). The United Church of Christ (UCC) was formed in 1957, when the E&R united with the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches (1931-1957), bringing influences from English Congregationalism and New England Puritanism to form a new denomination of around two million members. Each local UCC church is autonomous in the sense that it owns the church property and picks its own pastors, rather than having them assigned by a denominational authority. While the UCC is guided by a Statement of Faith, first adopted in 1959, the denomination has no power to impose particular worship practices, doctrines, or theological or political positions on local churches. The denomination operates on four levels: individual congregations, Associations to which these congregations belong by region, Conferences that are groups of these Associations, and a General Synod made up of elected delegates from the conferences. General Synod meets to determine its budget, to make recommendations on policy, and to issue pronouncements and resolutions (formal statements) on important issues. Unlike the Episcopal General Convention, however, the UCC General Synod has relatively little sway in authority over its component parts and is less capable of exercising tangible power.



Figure 2 Easter service, Nazareth

Nazareth has two clergy on staff: Kenneth, the Senior Pastor who is primarily responsible for preaching, and Martha, an Associate Pastor who runs the church youth group, several weekly events, and serves as a supply preacher when Kenneth is unavailable. The congregation elects a Leadership Council of around seven members (a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three members at large), who meet with Pastor Kenneth monthly to set policies and govern the church's direction. It is worth noting, however, that given the UCC structure, most major pieces of policy require a majority vote by the congregation to be implemented, especially policies that involve monetary investments. In addition to the council, there are "Ministry Teams" made up of groups of elected and invited congregants who work on specific aspects of

church life: Educations, Finance, Facilities, Worship, Member Care, Outreach, Fellowship, and Youth Ministry. Finally, the church employs three administrative staff to run the office, an organist, a choir director, and a bell choir director. Informal groups of volunteers take part in local community initiatives, including two local homeless shelters and a food bank. Other groups – a baking group, a men’s breakfast group, the choir – are more inward-facing; they help prepare for events throughout the year, including choral and instrumental concerts and an annual Oktoberfest celebration to honor the church’s German heritage

1.3.4 Second Presbyterian Church

Driving past stretching farmers’ fields toward the small city in which Second Presbyterian Church is located, its steeple is the first discernable landmark one sees on the skyline. The looming spire rises from a large sanctuary with a high vaulted ceiling. Attached to the main church building is a large rectangular education wing; both are brick, with shrubs and flowers in the mulched beds that outline the structure. The church was founded in 1825, and like Nazareth, this building was not the first to be used by the congregation. It was constructed in the 1860s. Second Presbyterian, with around one-hundred weekly attendees, has more stained glass in its sanctuary than any of the other churches. It casts vibrant magenta and green hues onto a mustard and blue carpet that is almost as old as the sanctuary itself. The altar, lectern, and pulpit are on a raised dais at the front of the room, with a choir loft behind it. On the wall behind the altar is a large wooden relief carving of the Last Supper, with Jesus raising a loaf of bread in blessing at its center. The church building is known for its aesthetics and is featured on the city’s annual Christmastime historic buildings tour, when it is lavishly decorated.



Figure 3 Children's sermon, Second Presbyterian

This congregation is more working-class in its makeup than St. Michael's or Nazareth. It is located in a community where many residents work in manufacturing or automotive supply, but several members of the church hold college or postgraduate degrees. As manufacturing jobs have dwindled in recent decades, the workforce profile of the members has become more diverse: real estate agents, yoga instructors, librarians, solar power engineers, university professors, mechanics, and waiters. In terms of party affiliation, this church is somewhere between St. Michael's and Nazareth, around seventy percent "Democrats" or "moderates," and thirty percent "Republicans" or "conservatives." A popular way members get to know each other is by joining the choir, which is a close-knit group of around twenty people whose comradery

does not keep them from inviting new members and visitors to join their ranks. Of the three churches, Second Presbyterian has the largest percentage of children and youth, and the church employs two nursery staff. The pastor often gives a “Children’s Sermon” (a short talk usually pertaining to the topic of her regular sermon) before they depart to play.

Like the UCC and other Reformed Protestant denominations, the PCUSA is rooted in the writings and teachings of John Calvin, although the branch of Reformed Protestantism that became Presbyterianism was also heavily influenced by the work of John Knox, founder of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The PCUSA was established as a national Presbyterian denomination in 1789, and has persisted through a series of separations, notably of more fundamentalist groups in the 1920s-40s, which now exist as separate denominations like the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) (the founder of which, J. Gresham Machen, I will discuss in Chapter 5). The PCUSA has experienced mergers as well as separations, including a large number of congregations from the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which joined in 1906. With its presbyterian form of church governance, from which the denomination derives its name, each local congregation is under the leadership of two separate groups of members: elders and deacons. Elders form the local administrative body, or session. Second Presbyterian’s session includes a group of “ruling” elders from the laity of the congregation, and the pastor, Camille. Pastor Camille serves as the “teaching” elder, who moderates the session. She is assisted by a Clerk who takes official minutes of the session’s monthly meetings. Elders are nominated by a nominating committee, elected by the congregation, and receive training for their office. The session is responsible for the church’s day-to-day functioning: congregational, monetary, spiritual, and personnel matters.

As part of its managerial duties, the session oversees a group of deacons. Deacons are responsible for public ministry and engage in projects of care for people in need or in crisis. The deacons at Second Presbyterian have regular meetings, during which they plan logistics for the ministries they undertake each year. For example, the deacons bring communion to sick or elderly members of the congregation who cannot attend services; they collect and administer funds for a variety of local and national charities; and they help coordinate church-wide service projects. Second Presbyterian also hires a “minister of music” to play the organ and direct the choir, an office manager, and a media specialist who runs the church’s social media, website, and designs the weekly bulletin.

All churches of a particular region belong to a presbytery. The regional presbytery has the power to form, merge, or dissolve congregations, and oversees the relationships between congregations and their teaching elders. Presbytery meetings include all teaching elders and ruling elders who have been commissioned by their sessions to represent their congregation. These presbyteries belong to sixteen larger synods, which in turn are under the national governing body of the General Assembly. The Assembly, comprised of commissioners the presbyteries elect (both ruling and teaching elders), sets denominational priorities and addresses concerns that pertain to the entire denomination. As the Episcopal General Convention oversees the BCP, the Presbyterian General Assembly oversees the denomination’s two-volume constitution: a *Book of Order* (governance/organization) and a *Book of Confessions* (doctrine/theology). While sessions have a considerable authority at the local church level, the constitution provides guidelines that determine how PCUSA congregations should function.

1.3.5 Doing Ethnography in Church

I divided my Sundays equally among the three congregations, conducting participant observation at their weekly worship services, which were held in the late morning and usually lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. The mainline denominations possess a similar formula and style of worship, and I encountered familiar patterns in each of the congregations. To ensure that the service is accessible to visitors, who might not recognize the general components of a mainline service, each church provides a printed bulletin to attendees as they enter the sanctuary. Bulletins list the hymns, prayers, and responsive readings of the day, giving those who do not have the order of worship memorized a sense of what to expect. The bulletin also lists announcements for the week and contact information for church staff. While my observations were by no means limited to worship, services did bring the largest number of congregants together in one space. Members spoke to each other in the pews before and after the service, and conversations spilled out into other common areas of the church after worship had concluded, even into the parking lots as members departed.

As I developed rapport with congregants and gained familiarity with each church's programming, I also began to attend churchwide events outside the context of worship, like picnics, camping trips, and community service work. As I became more of a familiar fact to members, I was increasingly invited to parishioners' homes, coffee shops, and restaurants for informal meals and conversations. I wanted to make sure I was spending this important time with congregants "outside of church," which took me to a variety of locations around Michigan. I joined a family on a trip to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, where the parents talked to their children about the legacy of racism in the United States. I walked up and down city streets decked with booths and displays for a summer festival, sipping lemonade with a church's deacon as she told me about her hopes for the future. I joined a church

committee member at a Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstration outside her city hall, and a choir member outside his son's school to protest gun violence. I picked up a congregant's dog from the veterinarian, and then the congregant and I shared coffee while she sat at her laptop and drafted a letter to her representative in Congress about protecting transgender youth. The kinds of public settings in which congregants participated exposed me to incredibly impactful events in their lives, but also to happenings that might seem to be mundane. These events gave me a fuller understanding of who congregants were outside contexts of worship, their hopes and motivations, and what kept their desire to be members of a church community strong.

While some of my closest relationships with parishioners developed in one-on-one settings, I also found opportunities to join smaller gatherings of congregants. I spent time in church offices with staff members and pastors as they kept track of weekly attendance, congregants' birthdays and anniversaries, and prayer lists. Clergy worked with staff to arrange pastoral schedules, which included visits to nursing homes and hospitals, one-on-one visits with parishioners, continuing education in congregational care, homiletics (preaching and sermon writing), theology, and social justice engagement. Meetings of important church governing bodies – for instance, the session, leadership councils, and the bishop's committee – involved smaller subsets of the congregation, as did meetings of worship committees, deacons, and service teams who supported charity organizations. Such groups convened on a fixed dates and took minutes of their meetings. Other groups were more informal, such as prayer circles or “altar guilds,” small groups of congregants who would change the vestments on the altar and pulpit, arrange flowers, and prepare Communion materials. As I note in Chapter 3, small groups were a primary way for parishioners to interact in church apart from the worship service itself: Sunday School classes, reading groups, Bible studies, and task forces. There were also several “hobby

groups,” made up of church members, who met weekly at the church to engage in activities like painting, quilting, or baking bread, often with some connection to a particular ministry. For example, one church had a group of about ten people who would crochet or knit, donating their products to the church. Some made blankets used as “prayer shawls” that were draped around the shoulders of new members joining the congregation, while others made scarves, hats, or mittens to donate to sick or shut-in members, or to the local women’s shelter.

The small groups were intimate, with between five and twenty members. I would not argue that these groups necessarily represented the church’s most energetic or involved members, but they were close-knit networks in the midst of larger congregations. In Bible studies and hobby groups, for instance, the same parishioners had often been meeting together for years or even decades. The church had brought them together, but their time with one another was not limited to church activities. They took vacations together, arranged play dates for their children, and discussed their jobs with one another. I was graciously welcomed into several of these groups during my fieldwork, and took part in their attempts to build an intimate sense of friendship, collegueship, and shared purpose.

I conducted 95 semi-structured interviews with clergy and laity in the three congregations, roughly 30 from each church. These were in-person interviews that took place in church buildings, cafes, public libraries, public parks, and the homes of congregants. I recorded on a voice recorder and a smartphone, ensuring I had two digital copies, which I transcribed after each interview. I began interviewing about six months into my fieldwork, giving people time to ask clarifying questions before deciding if it was something they wanted to do. I made public announcements at each congregation about the interviews, explaining their purpose and logistics. Finally, I wrote detailed blurbs for the church bulletins and websites advertising the interviews,

and I received replies from numerous interested congregants in person or over emails.

Developing interview questions was one area where my solicitation of feedback was primarily directed at church leadership, as I had already presented a list of questions to the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board for approval. I explained to each church's leadership what I wanted to ask and why, and I noted that they were free to remove or amend any of my specific queries. With no objections from the leadership bodies, I also informed individual interviewees that they could choose not to respond to any of the questions. Though the resulting list of questions formed the backbone of each interview, the semi-structured approach allowed for open, conversational encounters in which congregants could discuss issues and topics that mattered most to them (Weiss 1994). The format also enabled me to ask follow-up questions (Briggs 1986).

I took written notes as I recorded each interview, which I included alongside the typed transcript. I also transcribed portions of sermons, which the churches uploaded as audio files to their websites, meaning I could listen to the sermons even when I was not present on a particular Sunday. These transcripts and interview notes joined a wider corpus of fieldnotes. I brought notebooks with me to formal and informal events alike, and I transcribed the handwritten notes I took at the end of each week. As the volume of data grew and I began the process of coding, recurring themes emerged. I opted to refrain from automated analysis tools and instead coded the majority of this data "by hand," which involved going through all materials with a pen or highlighter in search of common themes. I would print notes or transcripts, cut the physical pieces of paper into separate segments containing particular notes, and move the sections into clusters around developing themes. As I analyzed fieldnotes, transcripts, audio recordings, and printed materials from the churches (bulletins, meeting agendas and minutes, congregational

reports), I worked to discern themes by initially organizing data around three core points: people, projects, problems. First, in terms of “people,” I used the coding process to track congregants who attended and/or organized multiple events, participated in discussions and/or debates, and worked on changing congregations’ policies and practices. I used this data to chart the division of labor across the congregations, which I could then supplement with interview data to get a sense of who was doing what within these institutions. The second point, “projects,” focused on what policies and practices were being modified in each church and what was remaining the same. Finally, for “problems,” I looked for commonalities in the kinds of conflicts that emerged in the churches, and why some problems caused debate, or overt division, while others did not. I began to group particular narratives together based on when they emerged in conversation or as the focus of public events (LGBTQ+ issues, theology, “politics,” or the future of the congregations, to name a few).

This methodology was lengthy and tedious at times, but I followed it precisely because it forced me to consult the data over and over again, gaining and retaining an intimate knowledge my research materials in the months and years after I collected them. It also gave me time for reflection, during which I could address aspects of the research I might have taken for granted with a more cursory approach. Like many scholars who study religious traditions they are (or were) part of, my background affected my project and how people interacted with me. Robert Orsi’s work with Roman Catholics (2005) and Grant Wacker’s histories of Pentecostalism (2001) focus on traditions with which these authors have an “autobiographical relationship” (Orsi 2005:149). My own “half out and half in” perspective created awkward gaps between me and my subject population. To build rapport, I shared my historical affiliation with the Christian institutions and congregants I worked with, a methodological choice that came with benefits and

drawbacks. Because I have a good working knowledge of the Bible, Protestant theology, and the order of Protestant worship, congregants were often eager to have me participate. They assumed they would not have to explain to me “what to do” when gathering the offering, reading the scripture aloud before the sermon, or joining the choir for an anthem. Because of this presumption, however, there were aspects of the congregants’ faith and their interactions with the church that they did not share without me explicitly prompting them. They assumed they would be sharing something with me that I already knew well. No one attempted to share their faith with me in a way that would prompt me to join their church, which they sometimes did with others outside their church, though not in the rhetorical style of “witnessing” Susan Harding experienced among fundamentalist Baptists (2000:35). This sharing of faith was not meant to “save” souls or convert new believers, as it very much is for many conservative Protestants. Instead, they did so to share the benefits of the institution itself and the community of people it contained. “If you’ve had a good meal, wouldn’t you want to tell others about the restaurant?” Mother Sophia asked a Bible study group. I often had to ask parishioners directly to tell me what they found fulfilling, enjoyable, and life-giving about their churches. Given my own history, they assumed their responses would not seem novel to me. An extended period of data analysis allowed me to identify lacunae in what I was learning from my interlocutors, and to address those gaps when the need arose.

1.4 All Are Welcome In This Place

Each of the three churches belong to denominations that affirm LGBTQ+ people through resolutions or policies. The Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Episcopal Church not only permit the membership of LGBTQ+ people but have also declared their eligibility for several kinds of participation in churches, including ordination as clergy. The

United Church of Christ was the earliest of the mainline denominations to call LGBTQ+ people to ministry, ordaining The Reverend William R. Johnson in 1972, and making Johnson the first openly gay man to be ordained in a mainline denomination (LGBTQ Religious Archives Network 2022). The first openly lesbian UCC minister, The Reverend Anne Holmes, was ordained in 1982 (Hyer 1982). After Johnson's ordination, the UCC General Synod passed several resolutions over the following decades pertaining to LGBTQ+ equality. In 1973, the Synod recommended, "In the instance of considering a stated homosexual's candidacy for ordination, the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather, the candidate's total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its use (expression)" (UCC 2022). Their 1975 pronouncement, "Civil Liberties Without Discrimination Related to Affectional or Sexual Preference," went even further, declaring,

...without considering in this document the rightness or wrongness of same-gender relationships, but recognizing that a person's affectional or sexual preference is not legitimate grounds on which to deny her or his civil liberties, the Tenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ proclaims the Christian conviction that all persons are entitled to full civil liberties and equal protection und the law (UCC 2022).

In 2003, a statement specifically affirmed transgender people's participation and ministry in the UCC, resolving, "all congregations of the United Church of Christ are encouraged to welcome transgender people into membership, ministry, and full participation" (UCC 2022).

The Episcopal Church permitted membership of gays and lesbians in 1976 through the General Convention's Resolution 1976-A069: "Resolved, That it is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church"

(Episcopal Archives 2022). A separate resolution that year also called for equal protection for homosexuals (Episcopal Archives 2022). Amendments to the canons surrounding nondiscrimination (including ordination) came a bit later. Resolution 1994-C020 prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in 1994:

Resolved, That Title I, Canon 17, Section 5 be amended as follows: No person shall be denied rights, status [in], or [access to] an equal place in the life, worship, and governance of this Church because of race, color, [or] ethnic origin, national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, disabilities or age, except as otherwise specified by [this] Canon (Episcopal Archives 2022).

The first openly lesbian and gay priests ordained by the denomination were The Reverend Ellen Barrett in 1976 and The Reverend J. Robert Williams in 1989 (LGBTQ Religious Archives 2022, Los Angeles Times 1992). Both were ordained before they were denominationally permitted to do so, and Williams was forced to resign. The General Convention called for nondiscrimination laws protecting people on the basis of gender identity in 2009 (Episcopal Archives 2022). In 2012, Resolution 2012-D002 added “gender identity and expression” to the canon pertaining to nondiscrimination, allowing for the ordination of transgender Episcopalians (Episcopal Archives 2022).

While the PCUSA made calls for civil rights and nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation in the 1970s and 80s, policies on ordination came the latest of the three denominations. In 1996, The Reverend Erin Swenson became the first transgender minister to remain ordained post-transition, when her presbytery voted to sustain her ordination (Copley 2021, LGBTQ Religious Archives Network 2022, Swenson 2010). In 2010, the PCUSA General Assembly amended the *Book of Order* to permit openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender ministers to be ordained at the discretion of their presbytery and session, with the change being

ratified in 2011 (Presbyterian Mission Agency 2022). The General Assembly amended the *Book of Order* in 2015 to permit same-sex marriages (Bailey 2015).

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community (Presbyterian Mission Agency 2022).

While these changes caused significant controversy in the denomination, the General Assembly continues to affirm the rights of LGBTQ+ people. In 2018, it passed two important Overtures. 11-12, “On Affirming and Celebrating the Full Dignity and Humanity of People of All Gender Identities,” and 11-13, “On Celebrating the Gifts of People of Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities in the Life of the Church” (PC-Biz 2022).

While the denominations themselves have made progress when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and statements, many mainline churches outside of large cities in the U.S. have only started having substantive conversations about LGBTQ+ issues within the past two decades. Policies at the national level aside, the situation can be altogether different at the local congregational level. Many of these denominational statements, especially in the UCC, are recommendations only, and not binding. Other policies leave these issues at the discretion of a congregation’s leadership. These denominations certainly are more LGBTQ+-friendly than many other religious groups in the United States. in terms of national and regional policy. But the degree of welcome a queer person may find at the local congregation in any of these three denominations is variable. The act of seeking a church in which to belong still carries risk. And while there may not be cruelty or prejudice waiting behind the doors of a church, there may

instead be apathy or a lack of understanding for the obstacles many LGBTQ+ Christians have faced in their searching for a church home. A heterosexual, cisgender lay member of a mainline congregation will likely not know the details of a denominational resolution or the content of the amendment to a canon. Even if pro-LGBTQ+ policies are known, there can be anxiety about what conflict might arise within a congregation if they – or LGBTQ+ issues in general – are discussed in the context of a church. Despite this lack of policy knowledge, non-queer church members at the local level, to borrow from Damani Partridge’s work on the relationships of White German women and Black male noncitizens, hold “discretionary power” on who to welcome, even if they are “unofficial actors” in the context of the wider denomination (2012:80-81). The parishioners who make these decisions need not be delegates at regional or national meetings, nor must they serve in a local church leadership capacity. To use Judith Butler’s framing, existing members can be instrumental in processes of inclusion because they are the constitutive “subjects” of the local church, choosing (or declining) to include people who have traditionally been “abject beings” in that setting (1993:2-3).

Chapter 2, “*I’m Not Trying to Preach Politics, But...*” discusses the parameters of conversations over welcoming LGBTQ+ people into mainline churches and the pitfalls those conversations present. I argue that as congregants debate LGBTQ+ issues, discern whether to amend their policies in ways that will signal more affirming environments, and prompt LGBTQ+ members to join in greater numbers, they delineate the boundaries of sacred. Their debates constitute the drawing of boundaries between what should be the domain of the Church and what should not. The often-stark delineation between *religion* and *politics* in particular is vital to understanding the unity (or disunity) maintained in mainline congregations, because it delimits both what topics of debate are “appropriate” and the potential policies and actions members may

undertake in addressing a particular issue. I focus on debates within the three churches about LGBTQ+ “welcoming designations” – formal affiliations between individual churches and LGBTQ+-affirming denominational grassroots coalitions – to argue further that mainline congregants, clergy and laity, use boundary setting between “the religious” and “the political” in order to maintain cohesion and avoid the ramifications which conflict could have on congregational stability.

Chapter 3, “*You Can Never Say That to a Fundamentalist*,” focuses on the theologies parishioners use both to affirm and to critique LGBTQ+ inclusion. To cultivate welcoming environments, congregants go through processes of rejecting “traditional theologies” that have been used to marginalize LGBTQ+ people, crafting and refining their own alternate claims. I explore church “small groups” – primarily reading groups and Bible studies organized by the congregations – and the strategies affirming church members used in these groups to develop theologies that contested condemnatory biblical exegeses. Parishioners built theological arguments for inclusion by refuting biblical “clobber passages,” a colloquial name for six biblical passages – in Genesis, Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy – used to justify the oppression of LGBTQ+ people. By focusing on interpretations of scripture that have caused the most harm, I argue that affirming mainliners both show the role that the Bible plays in their lives and become agents in theological meaning-making. Even if they do not claim to be specialists in biblical interpretation, they nonetheless made a core argument that the Bible cannot serve as a tool to deny LGBTQ+ participation in their institutions, or in any Christian institution. In attending to the ways queer Christians construct their own theologies, which will allow them a fuller claim to membership and participation in a church, we gain access to the kinds of labor

queer Christians undertake to enact inclusion and retain community among their fellow congregants.

Beyond setting parameters for discussion, and discerning a theological basis for LGBTQ+ inclusion, congregations must discern what they can actually “do” in terms of practice to convey a sense of welcoming and cultivate the conditions in which LGBTQ+ Christians may participate and thrive. I detail the most common and important of these practices in Chapter 4, *“In This House We Believe...”* But I also argue that non-queer members often struggle to conceptualize the queer body through an intersectional lens, as they encounter difficulty in wider efforts to repudiate systems of oppression that affect queer people. Congregants’ views of “difference” and “diversity” result in the compartmentalization and isolation of identity categories and experience when determining how best to grant access and equality to marginalized communities in church life. I argue that parishioners’ rush to declare difference mute and that “all are welcome,” through well meaning, leads to two major shortcomings in the types of welcome churches extend to LGBTQ+ people. First, congregants avoid discussions of race, white supremacy, and the complicity of Christian institutions in the U.S. in perpetuating systemic racism. Members acknowledge that racism is an egregious problem but are more hesitant to reckon with racism than they are with queerphobia. This overlooks the experiences of queer people of color. Second, rather than “LGBTQ+” serving as a metonym for myriad sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, queerness is often reduced to gay and lesbian identity, erasing transgender, nonbinary, gender fluid, and gender-nonconforming Christians who are often at more risk of harm in ecclesiastical spaces than gays and lesbians.

The uncertain future of the mainline denominations clouds the prospect of individual churches functioning as sites of intersectional inclusion. Several members in each of the three

churches had been part of a different congregation within the five years before my fieldwork, and these churches had either closed entirely or decreased significantly in membership. Chapter 5, *“Make Me a Servant Today”* addresses the “decline” of the mainline denominations in cultural influence, membership, finances, and primacy among Christian groups in the U.S. I frame this conversation by addressing a popular explanation for this decline which critiques the mainline denominations as ineffective and dismisses congregants who choose to remain and work for their congregations’ continued success as unrealistic in their aspirations. By focusing exclusively on why mainliners are departing their churches, I argue that those who remain committed, and refuse to frame their hope for the future as illusory, do not receive the attention they deserve. Overlooking members who stay particularly disregards the agency LGBTQ+ congregants employ in moving beyond experiences with exclusion by religious institutions and working for fuller participation. The agency of LGBTQ+ congregants in these churches primarily manifests through their efforts of continuing the work of their congregations in spite of a volatile path forward. Through these efforts, mainline parishioners find meaning and purpose in their church membership, and engage both in personal exploration of the sacred and communal service work with their fellow pew-mates.

Chapter 2 “I’m Not Here to Preach Politics, But...” Debating LGBTQ+ Welcoming Designations, Preserving Community, and Navigating “Politics”

2.1 Let There Be Peace On Earth

The chimes had only just struck noon, but the May morning was already so humid, I felt beads of sweat run across my temples and down my cheeks. I sat in the ornate sanctuary of Nazareth United Church of Christ, surrounded by intricate stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. In the first window, Jesus strides on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, clutched by a terrified St. Peter who is sinking beneath the torrents. In the second, He stands at the entrance to a home, knocking on the door. He appears to a surprised Mary Magdalene in the third, and in the final window He rises into the heavens flanked by angels. A sculpted copy of Bertel Thorvaldsen’s *Christus* from the 1930s, just over life-size, was mounted to the paneling behind the altar. The serene figure was rendered in dark wood, not in a gesture mimicking the crucifixion, but rather gazing out at the congregation, surrounded with billowing, delicately carved robes. A giant ceiling fan was buzzing overhead, but it did not keep me or the others around me from sweating too.

The events of the morning were building to an anxious crescendo. Pastor Kenneth had preached a sermon referencing the story of Christ and the woman taken in adultery in John 8. In this passage, religious leaders bring a woman who has been caught in adultery to Jesus. They declare that the law of Moses commands she should be stoned to death. In John 8:7, Jesus responds, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Quoting this passage, Pastor Kenneth preached that those who might judge LGBTQ+ Christians

should reconsider. They should “sweep their own side of the street” instead, following Jesus’ example. After the service concluded, most of the congregation stayed in the sanctuary to debate and ultimately vote on adopting a piece of writing, Nazareth’s “Covenant of Welcome.” This covenant made the following promises:

We, at Nazareth United Church of Christ, declare ourselves an Open and Affirming congregation where we celebrate Christ’s extravagant love. We covenant with God and with one another to welcome the diverse tapestry of all people, no matter their age, race, nationality, ethnicity, economic circumstance, marital or family status, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. We invite everyone – believers and questioners, seekers and skeptics – to share their gifts in the life, leadership, ministry, fellowship, worship, sacraments, responsibilities, and blessings of our congregation.

The portion of the covenant that had created the most tension was the promise to welcome people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Passing the covenant by a congregational majority was the final step in the process of Nazareth receiving an official LGBTQ+ welcoming designation from the Open and Affirming (ONA) Coalition of the United Church of Christ. The ONA Coalition formed in 1972 as the UCC Gay Caucus. In 1985, this Caucus took the lead in managing the implementation of a resolution that was adopted by the UCC’s Fifteenth General Synod, which stated that congregations should “adopt a nondiscrimination policy and a Covenant of Openness and Affirmation of persons of lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientation within the community of faith” (Open and Affirming Coalition 2022). This policy was meant to guarantee nondiscrimination in employment, membership, and volunteering across the UCC. As Aihwa Ong refers to processes of “citizen making” through policies and practices which represent particular values, affiliation

with the ONA coalition has become a point of departure for “congregant making” in the UCC, shifting queer subjects from being outside Christian institutions to fully participating in them (2003:7). The ONA coalition proclaims that LGBTQ+ people are “children of God” in the same way as non-queer people, and are therefore equally-entitled to share a place in religious settings with non-queer congregants. While initially focused exclusively on lesbian, gay, and bisexual members, covenants of welcome have since expanded in scope to include gender identity and gender expression. While the denomination officially encourages every UCC entity to adopt a covenant, is still left to each individual UCC congregation to decide whether they wish to affiliate with the coalition. The coalition offers its official welcoming designation to individual UCC congregations, campus ministries, colleges, seminaries, and other ecclesiastical bodies within the denomination. The designation certifies that said bodies have undertaken a discernment process –a time to engage in study, dialogue, and prayer – and have successfully voted on a covenant that explicitly declares welcome to the LGBTQ+ community. These covenants are intended to be a starting point to engage LGBTQ+ UCC members, and prompt non-queer church members to develop their allyship. Covenants are also meant to promote support for loving relationships between people of the same sex, and to promote advocacy for the basic civil rights of all queer people, Christian or not. More than 1,400 of the denomination’s 4,794 congregations have adopted covenants (Open and Affirming Coalition 2022).

The hour before Nazareth’s vote was filled with an uncomfortable tension, heightened by the heat. After Pastor Kenneth explained the logistics for the vote, he noted that he strongly supported adopting the covenant. About a dozen congregants stood up one by one for public comment. Each had a different reason for standing, but all spoke on how they would vote to adopt the covenant. When this string of supportive congregants took their seats, another member

rose, visibly incensed. He asked the pastor in a grave tone, “By adopting this covenant, will we be forced to hold same-sex marriages?” Such ceremonies had only been legal in Michigan for a relatively short time, having been legalized in Michigan by the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling in June 2015. The congregant, whose family sat beside him in silence, continued speaking. He believed that marriage was a key family value and was meant to be between one man and one woman. Holding a same-sex wedding at Nazareth would cause him to find another church. Pastor Kenneth responded that every UCC pastor was given the liberty by the denomination to marry whoever they wanted, without needing approval from the congregation. Given this autonomy, he would perform a same-sex wedding if the couple in question were willing to attend the pre-nuptial counseling and consultation he required of all couples. Another member, who was a weekly participant in the church choir and one of its most outgoing members, stood. She opposed the line in the covenant welcoming “skeptics.” She was concerned that line of text would lead to “a slippery slope” which could result in the congregation abandoning its shared beliefs. There were some beliefs all Christians must share, she continued, and certain tenets every congregation must believe if it was “really” a church. If the church welcomed skeptics, she said, members might start to question the divinity of Jesus Christ or another central belief. She looked around as if hoping to receive the applause that appeals to pass the covenant had received. Her comment was only greeted with murmurs, and she dejectedly took her seat.

Once congregants were verified to be rostered members of the church, they were given a paper ballot and settled into their seats. Such a strict approach to voting was not typical, even for approving the church’s annual budget. Pastor Kenneth had warned that in this special case, more formality would be beneficial. In a previous congregation he had pastored, on the day their ONA

covenant was to be voted on, opposed members brought like-minded people from other churches to interfere with the vote by casting additional ballots. While the task force organizing the vote at Nazareth had initially treated Pastor Kenneth's story as a curious anecdote, they spoke about it with increasing worry as the meeting date approached. They eventually decided to formally "check-in" voting members, to avoid any potential tampering. The covenant was the product of a lengthy and careful process, and had been drafted and edited by the task force over the previous year. Eight Nazareth members had been working for three years as part of the task force to secure congregational approval for their covenant through grassroots support. On this culminating day of those three years, the task force sat in the sanctuary with a mix of hope and dread, as this final vote represented the result of their efforts. They had opted out of counting ballots, to avoid being accused of tampering with the outcome. They all sat in a row next to me in Nazareth's front pew. As the ballots were gathered, ushers piled them on the altar and began to count them, somber and stony-faced as they went about their task.

Penny, a task force member, shifted uncomfortably in the pew next to me, dabbing sweat from her forehead. She anxiously rose from her spot and called to the organist, who had already turned in her ballot, asking if she would be willing to play "Let There Be Peace on Earth" while the congregation waited. The organist smiled and complied, returning to the organ. After about ten minutes of singing this and other hymns, Pastor Kenneth, walked to the front of the sanctuary and read the results. The covenant had passed by a large majority: 147 yes, 15 no, 3 abstaining. Applause filled the space. A large sheet of poster-board with the covenant written on it was brought out for congregants to sign in colorful Sharpies as a memento of the day. As we signed our names, Penny tearfully approached those of us signing the poster-board. She was crying because the congregant who had voiced opposition to the mention of "skeptics," and was a

fellow choir member, had just stormed out of building, saying that she would not return. Had we done something wrong, she asked us. Had we been “too political?”

Debates surrounding LGBTQ+ welcoming designations – formal affiliations between individual congregations and denominational grassroots coalitions that promote queer inclusion – serve as a useful entry point for better understanding how mainline institutions maintain internal cohesion in spite of ideological differences among members. More broadly, the way designations are discussed and framed is beneficial for providing insights on the ways religious subjects delimit categories of *religion* and *politics*. My fieldwork in the three congregations revealed a common tendency to either avoid or re-cast issues congregants consider divisive and conflictual to make them more palatable or relevant in ecclesiastical settings. In each congregation, a shared anxiety over whether welcoming queer folks into progressive Christian spaces should be contextualized as a religious undertaking or a political act was fundamental to setting the terms of discussion. It was a question of both how to define categories of religion and politics in the context of one another, and how to apply the categories to their debates. Were parishioners seeking greater equity for queer participants because they were following a divine call for justice, and acting in tune with their beliefs? Or were they instead venturing into the realm of “the political,” setting up a front to oppose anti-queer forces that were enjoying a greater national spotlight under the Trump presidential administration?

This hits on a key tension in the anthropology of Christianity, what Joel Robbins calls a tension “between the world of daily life and the world of ultimate religious meaning,” or “a tension between the mundane and the transcendental order” (2003:196, Lester 2003). Concerns over how to im/properly partition off “the religious” (or “the sacred” or “the spiritual”) has been a central theoretical concern in the study of religion (Taves 2009). But it is even more central to

the ways mainline Protestants understand belief and determine practice. This delamination is vital as it determines what topics can be debated, what beliefs are authoritative, and what actionable steps can be taken. For LGBTQ+ Christians, this delamination represents the difference between inclusion or exclusion, welcome or abjection. In this way, the dilemmas and contradictions congregants face in arriving at their understandings might be of use to anthropologists who seek to create anthropologies of Christianity which focus on intellectual/spiritual problems which animate Christians. They can come closer to providing an answer to Fenella Cannell's question: "What difference does Christianity make? What difference does it make to how people at different times and in different places understand the world" (2006:1)?

By delving into the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion, which is controversial or incendiary in many Christian contexts, we can see a pattern in which parishioners reference *religion* and *politics* as two separate and opposing domains and contest the boundaries between them. We can also access broader considerations and strategies among mainliners for mitigating conflict with their fellow congregants, and see the kinds of sacrifices required to maintain cohesion. I argue that the different positions the congregations took around welcoming designations not only provide us with specific insights into strategies that mainliners can take to set the terms of debate around LGBTQ+ inclusion, but also expose their methods of preserving and strengthening internal unity by cautiously navigating around "the political" in their policies and actions. Parishioners generally view the presence of politics in church contexts as undesirable, divisive, and a generator of unsolvable problems. Members told me politics is "dirty," soiling the otherwise-sacred processes of which they were part. While "being political" is generally cast in this negative light and decried as antithetical to the religious purposes for which people attend

church and are involved with its activities, it hovered over not only discussions of LGBTQ+ inclusion, but myriad issues the churches grappled with in their everyday functions.

2.2 Welcoming Designations and the Fear of “Politics”

In TEC, the PCUSA, and the UCC, affiliation with grassroots LGBTQ+ advocacy coalitions usually involves periods of discussion and consideration, culminating in the adoption of a document promising welcome and nondiscrimination in the congregation. The congregation or an elected group of representatives adopts the document by vote. After this, they receive a certificate of affiliation with their denominational coalition. Long-term partnership with these organizations usually also involves dues or financial contributions of some kind, either as formalized condition of affiliation, or due to gentle reminders sent to congregants and congregational leadership to make donations. Other logistics of affiliation after a document is adopted vary, and this tends to be where the organizations differ most significantly. For example, the type of contact they keep with member congregations can vary, depending on the staffing and budgets of the coalitions.

The stakes for partnering with these organizations are significantly high for two reasons. First, an official designation from a national body is often considered a benchmark for demonstrating an appropriate level of welcoming to ecumenical or interfaith LGBTQ+ welcoming organizations such as the National LGBTQ Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources, Believe Out Loud, and Gay Church. These groups advocate for queer Christians mostly via strong online presences, through which they advertise welcoming congregations to LGBTQ+ Christians who are seeking a church home in their local area. To be advertised as part of these directories, churches must substantiate their affirming status, which usually involves possessing a designation from their respective denomination. Having a coalitional affiliation

demonstrates that a church is willing to provide a space for debate and growth on LGBTQ+ issues, and has created space for marginalized people to feel safer than they normally would in a Christian context. Queer congregants and many affirming non-queer church members relayed to me that they used such websites to look for an affirming worship space, either when they were doing research on congregation to attend long-term or permanently join or were looking for a place to worship for a Sunday or two while traveling. The ecumenical and interfaith organizations, therefore, provide free marketing, and advertises churches' affirming statuses to a larger group of people over a much greater geographical area. This can extend a church's outreach far beyond what its own website and promotional materials would do. No wonder Nazareth's task force members were elated when their church eventually was added to these directories. It was certainly part of their motive for securing the designation, since they checked the various websites regularly in the months after the vote, delightedly anticipating the arrival of their own drop-pin on the map of Michigan.

Second, congregants in churches with welcoming designations often view those designations as important markers that set their church apart within their denomination and their region/state. This is because designations are a tangible and public way to signal to other local institutions that a majority of the congregation has explicitly committed to inclusion, and they are willing and proud to openly advertise it. If a church were the only religious institution in their city or county which was working to be affirming, this church could advertise itself as such on its website or visitor materials. If, alternatively, there are multiple institutions within a given zip code that have welcoming designations, those churches can signal a wider regional or denominational commitment to LGBTQ+ issues. They could argue that any particular congregation in that group that possesses a designation is on pace with others to provide a

welcoming space. Such a united commitment to welcome could serve as a powerful signal to other groups – Christian or not – that openly affirming queer people was a path that they too might consider.

In light of these benefits, discussions of whether to pursue these designations took place across each of the three churches where I conducted fieldwork. These debates were one of the areas where the category *politics* most noticeably hovered and was a cause of great anxiety. Debates over designations served as lightning rods for confronting the implications of a mainline institution—these congregations—taking a stance on queer issues. Dawne Moon’s work in *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (2004) with Methodist congregations explores debates over sexuality and anxieties over politics in mainline settings. Moon suggests that both clergy and laity often associate particular actions and arguments that range from the mundane to the critical with one of two fluid, opposed categories: *politics* or *church*. Similarly, the congregants I worked with often divided specific actions, policies, topics, and conversation between categories of “political” and “religious.” They argued that strife could be better avoided if the realms were kept separate and political discussions were kept at a minimum. The reasons such stark separation happens are complex and varied, but a prominent one has to do with mainliners associating prominent evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants taking too blatantly partisan stances in the national political arena. They pointed to prominent pastors like Kenneth Copeland and Paula White, unabashed supporters of Donald Trump’s presidential administration, who espoused controversial views on the Covid-19 pandemic and the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election (Grantham-Philips 2020, Woodward 2020). Congregants disapproved of these actions not because Copeland or White held viewpoints different from their own, but because they were using their clout as Christian clergy to lend credence to a kind of partisanship

which should not be present in religious life. My interlocutors contrastingly stress that they “know the difference” between religious and political issues and that they can discern the contexts when it is appropriate to discuss them.

Mainline Protestants have had an uncomfortable relationship with politics in the United States since at least the mid-nineteenth century, when conflicts over slavery gave way to rising tensions in the early twentieth centuries between increasingly-distinctive “fundamentalist” (“conservative”) and “modernist” (“liberal”) wings of American Protestantism. These wings were defined by disagreements over issues ranging from increasing numbers of Roman Catholic immigrants arriving from Europe to Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* (Balmer and Winner 2002; Herberg 1955; Hollinger 2013; Larson 2006). While schism and conflict have been omnipresent in the history of U.S. Christianity, a schism which is especially important to the history of the mainline denominations is the splintering of these wings of American Protestantism in the 1920s and 30s (Balmer 2006; Marsden 2006). Most of the institutional and denominational breaks which comprised this splintering followed the contentious *State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* –the “Scopes Monkey Trial” – in 1925. John Scopes, a high school biology teacher, was charged with teaching human evolution in violation of Tennessee’s Butler Act, which forbade public employees from refuting a biblical account of human origins. The trial is nearly mythic in many respects: the oratorical showdown between William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow for the defense, the extensive media coverage by the *Baltimore Evening Sun*’s H. L. Mencken which lampooned fundamentalists as backward hillbillies, the eventual guilty verdict, and Bryan’s death just days after the trial’s conclusion. Susan Harding describes this trial as not only a *representational event* – “a complex, multilayered, polyvocal, open-ended discursive process in which participants (including self-

appointed ‘observers’) created and contested representations of themselves, each other, and the event” – but also a key struggle for one of two differing views of Christianity to become hegemonic in its control of America, church, and state (1991:380). Randall Balmer calls the trial a “symbolic loss” of the country to the liberal, modernist Protestant denominations, which entered a period of dominance that lasted through the midcentury (Balmer and Winner 2002:64).

Mainline Protestants are the institutional, theological, and intellectual heirs of the early twentieth century modernists, and became typified as the first group in Will Herberg’s 1955 tripartite division: *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Marsden 2006; Wellman 2008; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Herberg wrote of this ascendancy, “The past quarter of a century has witnessed what is probably the most impressive renewal of Protestant religious thinking since the days of Jonathan Edwards” (1955:121). But despite holding what Joel Carpenter calls a “monopoly over Protestantism’s public representation,” the liberal denominations began to wane in the century’s second half, shrinking numerically and in their influence (1997:145). R Stephen Warner (1988) juxtaposes the numerical decline of the mainline denominations in these years with increasing political activism of clergy. Though he cautions the former is neither cause nor effect of the latter, those clergy who most directly engaged in “political action” often found themselves in conflict with far less radical groups of laity (1988:15-17). Meanwhile, after a period of fundamentalist separation and isolation from public and political life, what José Casanova likens to “scattered islands under siege in the sea of urban liberal Protestantism,” groups like Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and Edward McAteer’s Religious Roundtable worked with conservative activists like Heritage Foundation co-founder Paul Weyrich to mobilize and coalesce into what is now known as the “Religious Right” (Balmer 2014, Casanova 1994:146-147, Fox 2004). Evangelicalism regained their lost monopoly over American Christianity by the

early 1980s, which Harding describes as breaking of a tacit contract which characterized evangelicals and fundamentalists as non-participatory and withdrawn from the American public sphere (2000:21; Balmer and Winner 2002). Since this time, many mainliners perceive that their reputation for political participation is greatly overshadowed by the Religious Right. “Nobody cares what we think, they just want to hear what the evangelicals have to say,” an exasperated Second Presbyterian congregant told me once in our weekly Bible study. Even if mainline congregants critique evangelicals for engaging in politics *too much*, mainliners have long shared a penchant for engaging in politics as well. Unlike evangelical groups, however, mainline engagement often involves taking progressive positions on social issues. And like most evangelical groups, mainline institutions lack clear homogeneity in terms of political ideology, political party affiliation, and rhetorical positions around issues like LGBTQ+ inclusion. These differences among congregants contribute to high levels of tension that can generate inter-congregational or inter-denominational conflicts.

While debates over hot-button issues did not immediately lead to members storming off church grounds forever, the possibility that this *could* happen was a deeply felt worry. Despite incredibly strong bonds between members in each of the churches, a “split” was always something that came up as a primary fear and worry. Almost everyone had a story about a church they had heard about, or once belonged to, which had been torn apart by disagreement over a set of inflammatory issues. Departures of members are perceived as failures on the part of individual congregants and the entire church due to their inability to retain the member and maintain a space in which they felt united. In the three congregations, members make a point to discern which issues are incendiary (or “political”), and many then distance themselves from those issues to avoid the feeling of lacking unity. In the act of distancing, congregants often reported to me

that they wished to focus on “religious” matters instead. Congregants explained that this concentration on the sacred and the transcendent was tied to how they wanted to relate to their church, and how they wanted the wider community to perceive their congregation more broadly.

But the notion of what it meant to be *religious* was variable, not least because of the ubiquitous use of the terms “religion” and “Christian” by congregants. The use of the term “politics” was similarly common and had such a broad range of meaning that it would be hard to come up with a definition that even a fraction of any given congregation would accept. We can get a clearer sense of why understandings of the religious and the political remained so nebulous by considering Moon’s definitions of *politics* – “pertaining to the reproduction and negotiation of relations of power and privilege” – and *political conflict* – “when people experience [conflict] not as a matter of simple differences of opinion that might change with simple conversations but as something that has to do with people’s entrenched interests, including their understandings of the proper relations between themselves and others” (2004:127). The first is an etic definition which very few church members would use in their daily lives. The second comes with heavy qualifications: Whose “entrenched interests” serve as the standard here, and what qualifies an interest as entrenched? Where is the line between conflict that can be classified as “simple differences of opinion” and that which goes deeper? Moon gives an example of a church debate over carpet color as a minor conflict which contrasts to a theological debate over homosexuality. But even a discussion of carpet can meet Moon’s standards for political conflict. If you witness a mainline congregation argue about carpet (not to mention countertops or folding chairs) you will quickly realize how easily a topic that seems mundane can instigate conflict. By observing such a debate in its most fraught moments, you will gain a general idea of who holds power and privilege, and how that power is negotiated, meeting Moon’s standards for the presence of

politics in the conversation. Often, a clergyperson or governing body will have to intervene and make such cosmetic decisions unilaterally; the alternative can be endless debates that breed bitter rivalries.

When each of the three congregations took a different position toward adopting a welcoming designation, they navigated the question of whether to assign LGBTQ+ inclusion to the realm of politics or religion. Matei Candea explores a similar situation where his interlocutors advocate for the separation of “education” and “politics” into distinct conceptual spaces. Because the category of the political is, to use Moon’s wording, so “slippery” that it could almost be used arbitrarily, it might be tempting interpret the act of division as a political move in itself and explore it no further (2004:127). But to discount the division disregards the process of the interpretation that led to it, Candea argues, writing, “redefining the whole situation as ‘political’ thereby renders the distinction he is attempting to draw unintelligible: we are unlikely ever to inquire what he means by the political” (2011:311). By exploring mainline discussions over welcoming designations, which serve as a flashpoint for debating LGBTQ+ issues in congregational settings, we get a better sense of how congregants conceptualize the religious from the political, and the actions they take to keep the two categories separate.

The reasons for differences between the congregations’ approaches to adopting welcoming designations are numerous, and included level of clergy’s support for affiliation, the receptivity of the congregation overall, and the presence of a critical mass of congregants willing to invest time and labor in the affiliation process. Nazareth was the only one with an official welcoming designation, as a member congregation of the ONA Coalition. Second Presbyterian, on the other hand, soundly rejected affiliating with its own denominational coalition, More Light Presbyterians (MLP). The reason the pastor and other congregants gave for this rejection was

that it might seem like “special welcome” for one kind of Christian and not another. In their reasoning, being LGBTQ+ would a marked category of identity receiving special attention, leaving behind everyone else in the unmarked category and discounted as being less important to the fellowship of the church. St. Michael’s took a hybrid position, in that it did not formally affiliate with the national Episcopal welcoming organization, Integrity. But the church still called itself “Open and Affirming” on its website, signage, and bulletins, and was very open about its commitment to inclusion. I want to use these three different paths to draw out broader strategies mainline Protestants employ to navigate politics within their respective institutions. I will discuss not only members’ attitudes toward the designations themselves, but also how debates over the designations exposed a fear of disunity caused by political disagreement, and the ways congregants assuaged this disunity.

2.3 A Holy Journey

Nazareth’s congregation embraced the need for a welcoming designation as a crucial step in the life and ministry of the congregation. As such, the congregants leading the push for affiliation with ONA insisted that their motivation was religious and not political. Their strategy was to argue that, far from tainting the church’s mission with distraction or confrontation, theirs was an exercise of Christian growth. The task force which drafted the covenant of welcome continually framed the ONA project and its underlying goal of LGBTQ+ inclusion as solidly religious, since it worked to flatten the kinds of inequalities that existed both inside and outside the church doors. The task force successfully argued to a majority of the congregation that engaging in welcoming behaviors constituted a closer walk with Christ and neighbor alike

When Nazareth’s task force formed with seven lay members and Pastor Kenneth, they contacted the ONA Coalition to begin the process of affiliation. In response, the coalition

provided copies of *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0*. This is an instructive guide created by the ecumenical Institute for Welcoming Resources, a subgroup of the National LGBTQ Task Force and one of the organizations which manages an online database of queer affirming Christian institutions. While used for ONA certification by the UCC, representatives of various Protestant traditions contributed to and use the toolkit. The actions the toolkit encourages can easily be mistaken for typical events in a secular ballot initiative. First, a core team of congregants passionate about the goal form into a task force to lead the process. Once they have, presumably, received the blessing of congregational leadership, they hold panels and meetings with constituents to discuss the issues at hand. They use informal means of data collection like straw polls and listening sessions as part of their extended publicity campaign, to gauge congregational receptivity and get a better sense of how an eventual vote might turn out. Meanwhile, the task force drafts and amends the specific language of a Welcoming Statement, which the church will eventually vote on after a congregation-wide debate.

Nazareth's task force members anticipated that they would be accused of "activism" or bringing "partisanship" to their church, because that accusation had been made before, directed at the church's two clergy by more conservative members. When Pastor Kenneth preached a sermon where he slammed a statement made by Donald Trump in 2018 where he stated immigrants were coming to the United States from "shithole countries," accusations about his "political" motives flew around the parking lots as congregants walked to their vehicles. When Associate Pastor Martha mentioned climate activist Greta Thunberg as someone to admire in one of her sermons, one conservative congregant shared with me they felt it was "political propaganda." The ONA task force acknowledged that similar accusations might also be directed at both their organizing for an ONA vote and their public discussions of LGBTQ+ issues. In

meetings and private conversations alike, they expressed anxiety that those opposed to a vote might claim that the process had brought nothing but turmoil to the congregation by pushing a non-religious agenda and coercing members away from an exclusive concentration on religious matters. If that happened, the task force could easily lose credibility. As Moon writes, “For one member to accuse another of being ‘political’ was to accuse the person of bringing secular, petty concerns into the sacred realm...tainting something pure and diminishing something wondrous” (2004:128). My findings were similar to Moon’s in that an accusation of “being political” was viewed as an allegation of distracting parishioners from the parts of being church members that mattered most. Political issues were dangerous because they siphoned off energy that could be used to advance the mission of the church, muddling its functioning with unnecessary and irrelevant debates. Even if the intent of the task force was not to diminish the sacredness of Christian worship, which task force members treasured, the perception that the ONA process was impeding the congregation’s ability to worship in harmony could make the covenant unpopular and cause the vote to fail.

In response, the task force argued that the ONA process was wholly church-related.

Jordan, the task force’s co-chair, explained to me in an interview:

I believe that we are called to build heaven on earth, and I feel that this is part of that effort, to live out these ideals of beloved community, to welcome everyone to the table, and that’s God’s work. I also really believe as Christians that we are called to be uncomfortable, and that if we aren’t doing something that is extending [and] challenging us to open our hearts and minds...then we are not doing our duty. We are being kind of lazy that day.

Jordan added that steps the task force undertook were not a succession of secular actions but were rather “Part of a greater holy thing. A holy journey.” The framing of LGBTQ+ inclusion as

a “holy journey” was not limited to Jordan’s interview, and other task force members used it too when talking about the process. By associating ONA affiliation with holiness, the task force could encourage congregants to take part in ONA-related actions because, like other aspects of being in a Christian congregation, it would make congregants part of something bigger than themselves. For Jordan, the stakes of that bigger process were enormous: “building heaven on earth.”



Figure 4 Nazareth ONA task force praying over the "Covenant of Welcome"

Nazareth’s task force did much of the work to pass the covenant with little direct intervention by the ONA Coalition. The task force’s strategies in explaining to congregants that passing the Covenant of Welcome was holy, however, were in part influenced by the Welcoming

Toolkit. The toolkit stresses the importance of framing in the process of welcoming LGBTQ+ people into churches, both in the way a church communicates the goals and methods of that welcome to the congregation, and the way the church's welcome is displayed to the wider local community. The toolkit takes a quite literal approach to framing, using three graphics of the Mona Lisa in its ornate gilded frame in the Louvre, in a simple wooden frame, and with no frame at all. "What surrounds the THING – whatever the THING is – affects how we see the THING. This is the power of the frame" (Voelkel, Lohman, and Wunsch 2013:33). The toolkit continues that it is vital to contextualize the welcoming process in a frame that resonates with the congregation's history, culture, and beliefs.

Members of the task force worked to frame the ONA process in a way that engaged as many congregants as possible. Instead of speaking of "the policy," "the designation," or (mirroring the toolkit's language) the "Welcoming Statement," task force members called their statement the "Covenant of Welcomes." They usually referred to the document they wrote as simply "the covenant." This referenced biblical covenants to reinforce the sacredness of the covenant the church had before it. They also included prayers, Bible studies, and devotional exercises as their core activities, used to familiarize the congregation with the ONA coalition. During each Sunday service in the month before the vote, a different person gave a personal testimony, a familiar action in many Christian contexts, though less common in mainline settings. These testimonies, however, were specifically related to queer experience within Nazareth: A mother of a gay son wished he would come for just one Christmas service, but said she understood that he did not feel comfortable at Nazareth because the congregation had not taken a vocal stand for LGBTQ+ people. The mother of a transgender child said she trusted her fellow congregants to be kind, but feared that the congregation did not know enough about

gender identity to treat her child with due respect. A bisexual member assured the congregation that more people would be comfortable coming out without fear of reprisal if the congregation made a firm commitment to ONA tenets. These stories took on a distinctly religious flavor, stressing that LGBTQ+ people were not some abstract conglomeration of strangers, but beloved children of God who members knew by name. Such queer seekers yearned to be given the same opportunity to worship God, and just needed a respectful and equitable space in which to do so. The testimonies were highly effective emotionally and caused many in the pews to tear up or openly weep. Many of the speakers themselves wept at the lectern. The testimonies reinforced the idea that the act of passing the covenant could be associated with spiritual growth by the congregation. It would also fill a need for marginalized members of the community and correct a pattern of discrimination. Passing the covenant would further forge transcendent bonds of Christian fellowship and bring members closer together.

The toolkit states that while key parts of the process follow a trajectory, individual congregations must choose their own pace for the welcoming process. “This is more of an art than a science. This must be tailored for your particular setting” (Voelkel, Lohman, and Wunsch 2013:23). The toolkit therefore gives no precise timeframe for the length of the discernment period, giving each process a flexible schedule, noting that congregations might be “adventurous,” “moderate,” or “cautious” in their speed. Nazareth’s ONA process was certainly in the “cautious” category. It took over two years from the formation of its task force. This timeline is longer than the average timeline for a congregation to receive a designation, which is about twelve months. As we sat with cold brew coffees under the awning of a cafe a few months after the vote, Jordan explained to me that a longer trajectory was consistent with her framing of the process as a “holy journey.”

I think it is important to move with due haste. But I also think that there has to be some movement [by congregants]. There was definitely a push to just put a sticker on it and move on, and that makes me very uncomfortable. There were a lot of people where this was a growth area for them. They were not presently in an Open and Affirming place, but they were curious and open to thinking about it. In some sense the walk pace was necessary for those people.

For Jordan, a “walk” pace gave congregants the time they needed to grow their support for a designation, through study, reflection, conversation, and prayer. Without a rapid change, congregants might not associate the ONA designation with the kind of chaos they usually associate with politics. But when other task force members spoke with me about the process after the vote, they questioned whether they were simply lethargic, or had experienced a stalling tactic by non-affirming members. A task force member, Madeline, frustratedly exclaimed to me, “Why can’t Nazareth we get it done in a year? Let’s get onto the implementation of what we can be as a church once it’s done. Why do we have to be in this middle thing so long?” By “middle thing,” Madeline clarified that she referred to the extended period where it appeared a majority of the congregation supported affiliation but the vote was still approached slowly and with trepidation.

She noted that a straw poll they had taken over a year before the vote showed 75% of respondents favoring the Covenant and 25% opposing it or remaining neutral. When I asked if she believed a faster process would have had negative ramifications on the congregation, she shook her head with resolve.

No, I don’t see absolutely any drawbacks. The people who were dragging their heels, they were dragging their heels at the very end of the vote anyway. It wasn’t like the initial straw vote was 10% yes and 90% no. It seriously took two-and-a-half years for us to get it done.

For Madeline, enough people had “grown” by the time the straw poll was taken to pass the covenant, and she emphasized that the testimonies had proved to her how a lack of swift action had already harmed queer people, perhaps driving them away from Nazareth forever. Divisions among members over a church’s approach to welcoming and the speed at which a church becomes welcoming comes up in Moon’s work as she discusses two rhetorical trends which she calls a rhetoric of *patience* and a rhetoric of *pain*. A rhetoric of patience stresses “gay people’s need to be ‘patient’ with the church as it attempted to undergo a change of heart and mind” (Moon 2004:213). Moon’s description is similar to what Jordan argued was necessary. According to her, for Nazareth to avoid as much internal discord as possible and preserve the harmony of the congregation, they must move steadily but slowly. Under this approach, congregants must be given ample time to weigh the issues and “evolve” into an affirming stance, a term then-president Barack Obama used when publicly announcing his support for same-sex marriage for the first time (Gast 2012).

Conversely, a rhetoric of pain stresses the urgency of welcoming LGBTQ+ people, detailing painful incidents of rejection and violence against them, and appealing for relief and change. This rhetoric was present in Madeline’s appeal for a shorter process. It was also present in most of the testimonies during Nazareth’s Sunday services, stressing the pain of queer people who felt they could not belong to the church. Nazareth congregants integrated rhetorical styles that closely those Moon describes. The task force came to a consensus that they were willing to keep their progress slow the reasons Jordan explained, which a rhetoric of patience calls for. Jordan also noted that focusing too much on pain in advocating for the designation could inadvertently deny or refute the agency of LGBTQ+ visitors and congregants, reducing them to

seeming passive, lacking clear perspectives on their own religiosity, and needing to be “saved” by non-queer allies.

After the vote, when I asked the task force during one of their meetings why they had taken such a cautious approach, they pointed back to the 25% of straw poll respondents not supporting the covenant’s passage. Based on this outcome, a queer visitor would have a “one-in-four chance” of walking through the doors Nazareth and having a hostile pew-mate, and possibly experiencing queerphobic behavior. Task force members feared the space was not yet overwhelmingly welcoming, and situations resulting in pain could continue until a clear majority took actively inclusive stances. When I asked them what percentage of support in a straw poll would have been sufficient to eliminate discomfort, one member pointed to a piece of paper on the table with the voting results of 147 yes and 15 no, which she was about to hang on the church bulletin board. “Something like this,” she said. Members stressed to me that their emphasis on patience was not meant to comfort or coddle non-queer conservative congregants who refused to adjust their worldviews. But they still wanted to act in a way that did not result in losing a large number of those members. A slow pace was a necessary sacrifice, both to make certain they had cultivated a space which prevented those the covenant intended to welcome from being harmed even further, and to keep as broad a swath of the congregation involved at Nazareth as possible, so they could continue to grow as a community of faith.

2.4 “Cleanup of Aisle Four”

At Second Presbyterian, the strategy was to reject affiliating with More Light Presbyterians (MLP), a non-profit LGBTQ+ welcoming denominational coalition founded in 1992. Instead, members claimed that the congregation extended a full welcome to all, something they were mandated to do as Christians. This approach, they hoped would give the impression of

nonpartisanship and an entirely religious vocation. Though the church's leadership professed support for queer inclusion, the church making More Light's mission its own could divert the church from its optimal duties as a space "for all." It could become mired in squabbles over a particular set of interests that would make members forget the bonds that held them together. To that end, some members of Second Presbyterian worried that joining MLP constituted an explicit reconfiguration of the church especially for queer Christians, or at least it would seem that way to outsiders. Thus began the delegitimization of the MLP affiliation process as distracting, much in the same way Moon describes a delegitimization of "politics." In this case, the process was feared to be potentially unfair, which came with critiques of what members viewed as a *special welcome* for one group of people at the expense of all others. Resentment around the idea of non-queer Christians feeling excluded in a Christian house of worship kept Second Presbyterian away from MLP. It also reaffirmed, though somewhat inadvertently, a kind of sexual politics which opposes the expansion of queer rights by arguing such rights will give queer people an unfair advantage. Some (though not all) members worried that by affiliating with the grassroots organization it would imply to any visitors and to wider community that the only newcomers who were especially welcomed were LGBTQ+. Members who held this view framed that potentiality as "preferential treatment" which the church should not show, citing scripture like Romans 2:11: "For God shows no partiality."

Discussions of receiving a welcoming designation from MLP began when a group of congregants formed a reading group to discuss the memoir *Torn*. The book, a "practical guide for Christians everywhere who struggle with how to relate to gay friends or family members, or with their own sexuality" was written by Justin Lee, the founder and former executive director of the ecumenical organization The Gay Christian Network (now Queer Christian Fellowship). Lee

describes his struggles with his sexual orientation and Southern Baptist upbringing, and presents strategies for productive dialogue and reconciliation with non-affirming Christians (2012:249). Two days prior to the group's final meeting, the facilitators, Amber and Sarah, sent the group an email that said they wanted to discuss Second Presbyterian "becoming a More Light church" and included a link to the MLP website. Like ONA, MLP is a non-profit denominational coalition which works to empower and prepare PCUSA congregations to deepen their welcome for LGBTQ+ people. In response to a 1978 ruling that LGBTQ+ Presbyterians could not serve in leadership roles in PCUSA congregations, a group of congregations banded together in opposition, eventually formalizing as MLP. MLP's mission statement reads,

Following the risen Christ, and seeking to make the Church a true community of hospitality, the mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and society" (More Light Presbyterians 2022).

MLP recommends that PCUSA individuals, churches, and campus ministries which are committed to full LGBTQ inclusion consider officially affiliating with the national organization. For congregations, this happens in four steps. First, the session must formally vote to endorse MLP's mission statement. This is done after a process of educating themselves on LGBTQ+ inclusion and discerning if affiliation would be the right step for the church. Second, the church submits a form with logistical information and a description of the congregation's journey to affiliation. This accompanies the third step, a membership contribution of \$200. Finally, MLP includes the church on its website and social media, giving the congregation permission to use coalition materials and logos, and to call itself a *More Light church*. There are far fewer More

Light churches in the PCUSA than ONA churches in the UCC, numbering at around 230 nationwide (More Light Presbyterians 2022).

For years, Amber had been trying to find a way to begin a productive conversation about Second Presbyterian affiliating with MLP, and she felt like now was her chance. When Amber and Sarah met with me to talk about their interest in me joining the *Torn* reading group, Amber reiterated that an affiliation with MLP was both a personal calling for her and a reason why she had accepted a nomination to the session. She believed that it should be an obvious goal for Second Presbyterian, and once she brought it up to the reading group, she told me, “It should be a no-brainer for people” to favor affiliation. She intended to initiate the process as quickly as possible after getting the reading group’s feedback at their final Sunday-afternoon meeting, and officially propose affiliation to session the following Thursday. Sarah was not as familiar with the process as Amber, but was wholeheartedly supportive. She had just completed a term on the session, and speaking from a leadership role, she believed that welcoming actions like affiliation should be a crucial goal for the congregation. It was the kind of work she wanted to undertake as a Christian, and something she wanted her young children to see as an example of what a church can do. They would be proud of the church accomplishing this, she said, and she wanted to help actualize it as quickly as Amber did.

When the reading group convened for their final meeting, participants overwhelmingly agreed that they were moved by Lee’s writing. Chatting over slices of pizza from a parlor down the street, one participant opened the book and began reading a passage aloud that he felt Lee perfectly summarized. “Tragically, our treatment of LGBT people is one place where we’ve failed over and over again, and the neighbors Jesus taught us to love are the ones who have paid the price for our sins as a church” (2012:226). Here, the sin is not queerness, as it is framed in so

many Christian contexts. It is, rather, the exclusion of queer people and the failure to act in support of queer people. Members shook their heads in agreement, and discussed how the book's accounts of rejection from faith communities seemed all too familiar. Churches were communities where no one should feel unwelcome or at-risk, they agreed, but this was not always the case. Pastor Camille, who was also present in these sessions, made no secret of her feelings towards non-affirming Christian groups. "[It] makes me wanna flip a table over, reading this book. I'd wanna walk into that sanctuary and go STOP IT! Stop teaching this stuff!" Here, she was referring to teachings which contributed to the marginalization or rejection of queer folks specifically.

Feeling this was the perfect time to begin talking about a designation, Amber asked if people had taken the time to research MLP. But most participants, including some who were openly queer, fiercely resisted and debated affiliation. This initial resistance left Amber and Sarah surprised and dismayed. Sarah would later tell me that she was not surprised in hindsight, as the conversation had begun abruptly, but was still discouraged by the resistance. The group's major critique of MLP affiliation was that it would distract from the purpose of going to church, which a participant named Rachel explained was to "find God and worship together." She was concerned that the kinds of conversations which would need to be had to affiliate with MLP would take precious time away from worship. Pastor Camille asked that the group reframe the entire conversation as a hypothetical rather than treating affiliation as a forgone conclusion. "I just pastorally would like to ask us to be mindful. If word gets out that we are discussing this, I will have cleanup in aisle four to do. Because people will start to get anxious, maybe people will come to me, they'll have parking lot conversations with me." Even if she did not spearhead the affiliation process, she clarified, congregants would assume she had taken a position in support

of it. The consequence would be like a grocery store employee hearing “cleanup on aisle four” over an intercom. In this case, the messes she would be cleaning were the anxieties, objections, or hostilities of those who opposed affiliation. Congregants might approach her in the church parking lot as she walked toward her car (this often happens in churches, with disgruntled parishioners approaching clergy in church parking lots, rather than inside the building), telling her that they would not support working with MLP. She reaffirmed that she was not opposed to welcoming LGBTQ+ churchgoers but recognized that she would be perceived as a key player in any action taken. She wanted to make sure that she had input into the process before having to bear the brunt of opposition and provide spiritual justification for such an action.

Admonishments to avoid topics and actions which detract from what should be the real foci of church – following and worshipping Jesus Christ – had come up at Second Presbyterian before, in contexts outside the reading group (Moon 2004:131). Concerns about this were most acute due to the congregation’s massive schism from 2010 to 2012. Laura, a longtime member who had served on the congregation’s governing Session prior to the split, recounted how the former pastor had sought to remove the congregation from the denomination. He frequently preached that the PCUSA had embraced “liberal politics” that were incompatible with biblical truth. Using “biblical truth” in this way was his shorthand, Laura argued, for saying the denomination was becoming too permissive of its queer members and considering them for positions of authority.

He couched it as “not following the gospel,” but to me that was code for “you are recognizing homosexuals, and you’re going to allow them to preach in your church.” Our former pastor before the schism was fond of saying, “homosexuals are welcome here, but they just have no rights.”

Eventually, the presbytery intervened and advocated for the parishioners who wanted to stay in the denomination to keep the church building, becoming the current Second Presbyterian congregation. Meanwhile, the pastor and his followers moved to an empty church building a few blocks away. The wounds of the schism were still far from healed, and friendships between the contingents of the former congregation were permanently marred. One member began to cry in an interview when I asked about the schism, describing how a former congregant who left with the past still turns their cart the other way when approaching her in the grocery store. Several other church members who had been members at the time of the schism shared similar accounts of the lingering trauma. They said that they feared the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion would sow further discord. This trepidation resulted in congregants generally agreeing that they should diligently avoid any conflict that would further deplete church membership or cause another schism.

The aspect of MLP affiliation the group saw to be most threatening to congregational interests was that it would reconfigure the church's welcome in a way that singled out LGBTQ+ people. A gay participant in the reading group, Terrence, framed this reconfiguration in terms of physical alterations to the space of the church (putting up rainbow flags), arguing, "In this community, you don't want to say, 'Did you see all the rainbow flags?' Because these other people who aren't ready to turn the corner will go, 'I thought I could go there, but now look what they've done!'" By people "turning the corner," Terrence referenced prospective visitors might not approve of LGBTQ+-affirming churches, and thus feel unwelcome. Terrence also noted an MLP affiliation could compromise his personal safety as a gay man, citing a planned overhaul of the Department of Health and Human Services by the Trump administration, which could shield health workers who did not want to provide services to LGBTQ+ patients to which they have

religious or moral objections (Politico 2018). Terrence stated that he was a cancer survivor, but he feared that his extended period of remission could end at any time. He worried that he could be denied care by local healthcare providers if his church reconfigured itself in this way. “We must be so careful. People will be pointing fingers and saying, ‘Oh, did you know they were gay? Did you see their rainbow flag?’ I don’t want to join Second Presbyterian Church and die!” Terrence would later tell me that it was the subtlety of the church when it came to advertising its approach to welcoming inclusion that made him feel so comfortable. “It’s communicated that inclusion is inherent here. I don’t know that there’s a neon disco light out front, saying ‘ALL GAYS WELCOME.’ No. And I don’t think there should be. I think it’s about the integrity of Second Pres.” For Terrence, by not explicitly declaring welcome, the church protected queer members from outside scrutiny in the mostly rural and highly conservative region of Michigan.

While other participants agreed with Terrence that MLP affiliation could out LGBTQ+-Second Presbyterian members and subject them to undue scrutiny or even physical and emotional harm, their objection centered more on Terrence’s initial worry that affiliation would make non-queer potential members feel undervalued. “How do we become welcoming to *everybody* in a way that doesn’t say, we especially welcome this particular group,” Rachel argued. “I don’t want to say, ‘You. Because you’re whatever, you’re welcome here. You’re welcome here because you’re a human.’” Terrence shook his head, murmuring, “*all* are welcome.” This framing of a specific welcome as hindering a more desirable, all-encompassing welcome is reminiscent of the rhetorical device of “No Special Rights” which Didi Herman analyzes in *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*. She argues that members of the Christian Right mount effective challenges to civil rights for gays and lesbians by claiming that these rights represent privileges gays and lesbians already abundantly possess,

making their explicit presence in a piece of legislation extra or “special” privileges (1997:120). Tina Fetner’s (2008) work on the relationship between gay rights activists and the Religious Right in the United States adds that when anti-LGBTQ+ Christians widely deployed this framing across the country in the early 1990s it was largely successful because it pushed an idea that lesbians and gays were demanding something that heterosexual citizens would not be getting. After all, members of Religious Right further argued, the U.S. constitution already guaranteed equality for all citizens. That which was meant to promote further equality, therefore, was smeared as a sure way to promote inequality, and even reverse-discrimination. Similarly, participants in the *Torn* reading group argued that Christianity should equally welcome everyone, affiliating with MLP would be equally redundant, giving queer Christians an invitation to be welcomed at church which they already had. This was an argument that, meanwhile, several Nazareth congregants disavowed, arguing that an explicit declaration of welcome was not redundancy, but the correction of an egregious oversight. Queer people, they had argued, do not have an implicit invitation to join a Christian space in the way non-queer Christians do.

Just because members like Rachel, Terence, and others in the reading group had been so quick to dismiss the idea of MLP affiliation, it should not be assumed that every congregant agreed with them. Another reading group participant, Kayla, was frustrated that people who were critical of MLP had drowned out people like her who favored affiliation. As a bisexual woman, she already felt invisible within the wide umbrella of “LGBTQ+ Christians.” She also worried that since Terence had so vocally opposed affiliation, the congregation would also oppose affiliation to respect his wishes, assuming that all queer church members shared his skepticism. Rejecting an affiliation, therefore, could be framed as a protective measure for all queer members, even though Kayla disagreed. She felt like she had been given no chance to explain

why affiliation would benefit the church. But as she listened to the debate, she told me she had started to think instead that perhaps the congregation was not ready to take such a step anyway:

It's kind of a weird place, right? It's like we don't want to do that, even though...in a lot of ways our actions our actions are saying we're totally ready to embrace [MLP]. But by saying we're not ready, that goes against what our actions are saying.

When I asked Kayla how she explained this incongruence, she responded that she thought Second Presbyterian had an interest in cultivating *safe space*, a term with many definitions but which often has key associations with queer politics, such as Christina Hanhardt's work (2013) on queer populations and violence in American cities. But as Kayla continued, it became clear that, while her framing of "safe space" in the context of what she felt the church was trying to achieve included ideas of increased sympathy and visibility that resemble Hanhardt's, the safe space she described was not meant to protect queer folks, but rather people who oppose queer inclusion.

They're holding safe space for people who don't acknowledge the full humanity of LGBTQ people, that's not a safe space we need to hold. I think you need to protect the most vulnerable first, and in church environments especially, the people who have been most hurt by the church are LGBTQ.

Kayla felt space was already being partitioned in the way many feared an MLP affiliation would do, but that partitioning was meant to protect (and even to privilege) views of non-affirming congregants by seeking to avoid an MLP discernment period in which those views would be explicitly questioned and rebuffed. The rhetoric related to avoiding special welcome for LGBTQ+ Christians members, deployed in the debate over MLP affiliation, maintained this protection. Though Herman links this rhetoric to conservative Protestants, mainline debates over

similar topics also cause pain to both queer and non-queer congregants. To members like Kayla, such rhetoric was hurtful, especially coming from a church which prided itself on its willingness to engage with the wider community, including its most marginalized member. Finding this rhetoric deployed in a PCUSA church, which many of its members call “the most liberal church in town,” shows the kinds of exclusionary sexual politics Herman describes can extend beyond the purview of groups traditionally categorized as part of the Christian Right.

In the months after the *Torn* group roundly rejected MLP affiliation, most reading group members told me subsequent interviews and conversations that they still feared a process of affiliation would provoke congregational disunity. But with time, some began to second-guess their original oppositional arguments in terms of “special treatment,” even just a few weeks after they had made them. As we sat in the same small pizza parlor which had supplied the lunch for our final *Torn* meeting, a former group participant, Dorie, reiterated her concern about whether naming specific demographics as those the Church desires to welcome may “privilege some groups over others.” Thinking aloud, she asked, “is it really as all-welcoming to have a welcoming designation?” She then paused, sat back in her chair, took a long sip of the soda in her hand, and was silent for a few seconds, before continuing, “at the same time, I’m listening to myself talk and I’m thinking ok, so am I saying ‘all lives matter?’” Dorie continued that if someone had made such a comment in the context of race, specifically as a response to the “Black Lives Matter” movement, she would be offended. As we finished our pizza, she said she felt her previous position had been made indelicately and required more discernment.

In an even more abrupt reversal, Rachel, one of the most vocal opponents of affiliation in the initial conversation, shared that her view shifted after further consideration. While she admitted that on the day of the reading group meeting, she had been frustrated with the

discussion, she had begun to think about a designation differently after praying. She had come to view MLP affiliation not as blatant partiality, and an exclusion of non-queer Christians like herself from opportunities to participate. Instead, her prayers had led her to think of affiliation as a way to ease the trepidation of potential LGBTQ+ churchgoers. As a heterosexual, married woman, she said she had very little concern for being rejected or treated differently by fellow members. When she had moved to Michigan with her husband a few years prior and decided to start attending Second Presbyterian, she had felt welcomed immediately. She told me that her lack of concern exemplified a degree of privilege not everyone had, and that if she had felt unwelcomed, it might have prevented her from coming to church ever again. Her eventual conclusion was a lingering skepticism for MLP over the sense of inequality an affiliation might generate, but an acknowledgement that the benefits to marginalized people would outweigh the costs.

Why do we have to do this? Well we do because people are going to look at it, to decide what church they're going to go to. And wouldn't it be horrible to come into a church and find out that you were shunned because you're gay or transgender. That would be a terrible thing. So from that point of view, I can see where it might be important. I resist it, but I can see.

For Rachel, the prospect of an MLP designation eventually became more palatable because it would send a clear message to queer seekers who did not know if they would be marginalized or not. Just because she personally did not need such a message when she was deciding to make Second Presbyterian her church home, that did not mean it was any less necessary.

As for Amber, the former reading group facilitator told me that she was still optimistic about eventually proposing the designation to the Session. "It's a process, more than a finite thing. You have to work on it and have it someplace in the back of your mind when you're

planning things.” Coming to a similar conclusion as the majority of Nazareth’s task force, Amber noted the speed of the process was slow but could result in more minds changing, as Dorie’s and Rachel’s had. The more minds could be changed, “We can leave less ‘cleanup on aisle four’ for Pastor Camille,” Amber said with a laugh, recalling what the pastor had worried would follow a hasty affiliation. Amber had been truly shaken by the response of the *Torn* reading group, but would not let that disappointment dampen her resolve, especially since Sarah still shared her same passion for gaining a designation. Her spirits had lifted slightly when several members of the church had begun to pressure their city council to approve a nearby closed-down senior home to be converted into a women and children’s shelter. A vast majority of the congregation was vocally in favor of this shelter, and even lobbied in groups at meetings of the city council, despite knowing that their neighbors might feel differently about the topic or have budget/economic concerns.

In the wake of this public involvement, Amber noted that congregational leadership had begun to speak more openly about taking positions on topics of poverty, homelessness, and community care in their neighborhoods, and then talking about those positions in church, with a little less fear of seeming “political.” They did not seem as worried, she noted, that they were going to cause another schism every time they brought up an issue that could cause disagreement with other parishioners. The growing willingness of congregants to more boldly engage in debates on topics related to social justice in their municipality gave Amber hope that further debates over LGBTQ+ inclusion and a reconsideration of affiliating with MLP might be next. Congregants, she hoped, might one day abandon their trepidation that such engagement might be off-putting to potential new members or would make non-queer members feel left out.

2.5 A Politics of Non-Confrontation

St. Michael's proudly displayed the words "OPEN AND AFFIRMING" on its sign, but the church's position was far less defined than at Nazareth or Second Presbyterian in terms of affiliation with a specific organization. It had no affiliation with Integrity, a national organization originally founded in 1974 by Louie Crew in San Francisco, to connect queer Episcopalians (LGBTQ Religious Archives Network 2022). In a phone conversation I had with Crew shortly before his death in 2018, he noted at the time he founded Integrity it was a "kiss of death" for clergy or churches to be identified with queer organizing, and the organization was mostly lay led. The stigma of being part of it gradually eased-up with the 1994 general convention when "real changes" happened for gay and lesbians Episcopalians who were granted access to ordination, and again in 2004 when The Right Reverend Gene Robinson becoming the consecrated bishop for the Diocese of New Hampshire. Crew then provided some input on why the situation in Episcopal churches is markedly different than the UCC or PCUSA. While Integrity had been a strong voice for LGBTQ+ participation, including the 2015 decision to grant same-sex couples the rite of Holy Matrimony, Crew noted that Integrity had done its work making queer participants in Episcopal worship "less theoretical to people" and was perhaps becoming less relevant. Because of the denomination's structure and policies, any queer Episcopalian, he hoped, could (or at least should) expect affirming treatment from any congregation affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

Integrity largely vanished from the conversation of U.S. mainline grassroots groups in 2018, around the time Crew and I spoke, after a sharp decline in assets, controversies over mismanagement, and resignations from its board of directors. The group formally dissolved in 2022, after several of its former presidents called for its dissolution (Millard 2020). Susan

Russell, president of Integrity from 2003-2009, wrote in her blog, “I am persuaded that the old wineskins of Integrity USA's organizational structure are neither adequate, sufficient nor capable of equipping us for the work we are being called to do” (2020). Despite the changes related to membership, ordination, and same-sex marriage addressing only a narrow sliver of queer experience, Integrity seems to have had difficulty recalibrating after the 2015 shifts within the denomination and had not noticeably broadened its focus and mission to address other pressing issues affecting queer Episcopalians.

Without connections to a larger welcoming organization, St. Michael’s strategy became to adopt inclusive behaviors that would characterize a church that held a designation, even though it did not possess a designation. Church members noted that they had no idea where the congregation would stand in terms of meeting the criteria for getting a designation if they ever found a relevant organization to partner with. They expressed certainty, however, that the congregation welcomed LGBTQ+ people and did so unashamedly. As in the other two churches, St. Michael’s congregants were apprehensive that replicating any patterns of conflict within their congregations would hinder their personal worship experience and would lead them to resent the church. Too much disagreement could irritate members or visitors who would then abandon the congregation, affecting the church spiritually and financially and lowering the morale of those who remained. They had also experienced a split, much smaller and less traumatic than Second Presbyterian’s, but one which had still cost around a tenth of their membership. Conflict that could push away more members was something the leadership and laity wanted to avoid, which was among the reasons for its lack of official welcoming but its embrace of being an “Open and Affirming” space for LGBTQ+ people. This nebulous understanding of the church as welcoming, and as embracing a middle-road in neither seeking nor refusing a designation, fits

into a wider strategy that I will call a “politics of non-confrontation.” It consists of describing and setting the parameters of debate around queer inclusion in the most affable or amiable ways possible to avoid conflict among members.

A good example of a politics of non-confrontation took place at a “Consecration Sunday” event at St. Michael’s. Members were encouraged during the offering to write their projected monetary gifts for the coming year on a pledge card and lay the cards on the altar. Mother Sophia gave a sermon prior to the offering which, naturally, was on the topic of giving. She listed ways the congregation gave back to its community, including that some members had begun the “Open Hearts Club,” a drop-in center that St. Michael’s hosted and ran for queer youth in the area. The center was designed and operated by a group of congregants who intended to provide an inclusive space to share snacks and games after school several times a month. Neither the youth participants nor their families attended services, but the mostly middle-school and high-school aged students were still encouraged to join the club, assured that there was no ulterior motive to “convert” them to Episcopalians. Before moving on with the sermon, Mother Sophia joked that when asked how often the church should hold drop-in hours, a student had enthusiastically suggested “every day.” This led to smiles and laughs from the congregation. This moment, which took up less than a minute in her sermon, was part of a trend that typifies the non-confrontational strategy I observed. This strategy primarily invoked invoking the topic of welcoming LGBTQ+ people through brief mentions of the already-inclusive environments which congregations provided. These mentions, which I will primarily show in the context of sermons, frame queer inclusion as an operation which was ongoing or which had already been successful, allowing the taking of a markedly non-confrontational stance which would be palatable to a politically mixed congregation and alleviate potential conflict.

Nancy Tatom Ammerman argues that, as voluntary organizations, churches do not rely so much on material resources as on human resources who can imagine or plan change within the membership (2001:326). Money is a concern, of course, but Ammerman argues that the types of rewards church members expect from their regular participation are not material, as in a business organization, but spiritual or social. Lay leaders are able, to a degree, to draw connections between the congregation as it is and as it could be. Clergy, however, play the primary role in what Ammerman describes as visioning how the church can remain spiritually and socially rewarding for congregants (2001:326). In Ammerman's work, pastors' strong leadership roles of this kind are present across Christian congregations, including those in mainline denominations. The stakes for this visioning are high, for as Jarel Robinson-Brown writes, "The chasm between the Church as it is and the Church as it might be is evident to those of us whose breath is stifled by its knee, and who exist beyond its body" (2021:134).

Clergy at all three congregations shared with me that they felt these high stakes, and the very public roles they played in the directions their churches were following. They were able, along with other members of church leadership, to point out the rewards and possibilities of actions like making commitments to greater inclusivity. They also mentioned dangers and consequences, like Pastor Camille's worry of "parking lot conversations" with upset members at Second Presbyterian. While clergy find opportunities to do this kind of visioning of what their church is and can be in Bible studies, committee meetings, and one-on-one discussions with parishioners, their largest audiences come with their weekly sermons. But in preaching, pastors and priests must navigate a significant tension around the mitigation of conflict. They must find ways in which they could discuss issues in their sermons that were being deliberated in non-church contexts and which matter deeply to parishioners, so as not to cast the church as being

irrelevant to such debates. Yet, pastors often feel equally strong obligations to retain a certain amount of neutrality and avoid accusations of bias in ideologically mixed congregations.

At times, the sermons I heard would overtly center around queer issues and make an unambiguous case that there was more work to be done regarding inclusion. For example, Mother Sophia gave a sermon which was highly critical of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Luke in Orlando, Florida, whose clergy refused to baptize the adopted baby of a same-sex couple. She observed that, far from following a path defined by love of God and neighbor alike, officials at the church were letting prejudice prevent them from welcoming an infant named Jack into the Body of Christ, because his parents were two men. This story had immediately garnered attention online, especially on Episcopal blogs and social media pages, with commenters quick to point out that the bishop of this diocese, The Right Reverend Greg Brewer, opposed changing Episcopal liturgy to allow same-sex marriages (Ring 2015). But denying baptism was another matter entirely, which Brewer alleged was not what he was trying to do. Brewer noted he was simply wanting to know why baptism was important to the parents, and if they intended to raise Jack as a Christian (Kunerth 2015). Mother Sophia said that such a statement was an insult, since it seemed to insinuate that the couple, by needing to meet with him first, had malintent or subversive designs in wanting to baptize their son. She wondered if this was a level of scrutiny the bishop was also applying to heterosexual couples? How heartbreaking, she concluded in a somber tone, that the cathedral had closed its doors to already-marginalized Christians, who simply wanted to partake in one of the most vital Christian sacraments.

With a tension between staying engaged while assuaging confrontation, however, Mother Sophia often employed a more oblique style when discussing queer inclusion in sermons. She might reference LGBTQ+ issues by using terms like “gay,” “lesbian,” “transgender,” “queer,”

“same-sex,” and so forth occasionally, once every month or two. But often, the references were far more covert. Her brief discussion of the St. Michael’s youth group is a good example of this latter and more popular style. First, the mention was both brief and part of a list of all the congregation’s outreach activities, which included volunteering at a local food pantry, hosting a chapter of Overeaters’ Anonymous in their building, and collecting school supplies for children every autumn. Mentioning the youth group highlighted the relevance of queer inclusion but placed it among these other activities. She never explicitly stated the group was for queer youth, although this was by no means a secret to the congregation. Second, she summarized a previous achievement rather than making a further call to action or suggesting means of further involvement. The mention suggested St. Michael’s was already progressive enough for such a group to exist at all and had already done the work it needed to do on this aspect of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Clergy at the other two churches occasionally also used the more oblique non-confrontational style of briefly referencing queer issues. For example, in one of Pastor Kenneth’s sermons, he compared individual congregations to ships. He used props to illustrate this analogy, placing a model sailboat on the altar. Using a small portable air compressor with a hose attachment which he had brought into the sanctuary, he aimed the hose at the boat and filled the sails with wind:

Sometimes we tend to think of Church as a cruise ship, but the church is not that kind of a vessel. It’s like a Coast Guard cutter. No one here is on a cruise ship, everyone here is a member of a crew on a lifesaving vessel. There will be many churches in the next ten years who will be sunk or up on the rocks.

By contrasting Nazareth with “many churches” which will fail from incorrect management of their ships, Pastor Kenneth is doing the kind of visioning and connecting Ammerman discusses,

reinforcing the relevance of the congregation with its “life-saving” purpose. Gesturing to a banner on the wall of the sanctuary, he continued, “One of our sails is that document right up there, that we welcome all people despite differences, and make this a safe place for all people. That we include people.” The document he referenced was a large banner printed with the words of Nazareth’s ONA covenant. With its rainbow border and explicit statement of welcome regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, Pastor Kenneth was directly aligning the inclusion of queer participants with the sail of the ship, catching the wind of the Holy Spirit and taking the church in a favorable direction. His mention did not verbally reference including LGBTQ+ people specifically. Instead, he described the covenant in widely encompassing terms, guaranteeing welcome and safety for “all people.” The covenant also pledged nondiscrimination based on age, race, ability, and socioeconomic status, and while LGBTQ+ inclusion was certainly included in his much wider statement about welcome, it was not explicitly singled out. Pastor Kenneth also preached this sermon two years after the congregation adopted the covenant, making his mention like Mother Sophia’s in that it congratulated the congregation on a past achievement and implied that the goal of welcoming all, including queer members, had been accomplished. The ship already had successfully hoisted its sail of inclusivity.

This practice of oblique, non-confrontational references, at its core, is not deployed in sermons with the sole intent of being evasive, noncommittal, or fainthearted. Rather, many clergy view the technique of brief, sometimes oblique mentions as a useful tool to strategically familiarize congregants with pressing issues in a way that will give potentially opposed members the opportunity to tune in, and perhaps listen to views they would otherwise eschew. With these opportunities, people who might oppose changes that were happening in the church could be

given time to grow more comfortable. Nazareth's Associate Pastor Martha told me about her technique of *touches*, saying,

Even if my sermons aren't always as overtly progressive as my theology is, I try not to compromise those things when I preach. One example with LGBT issues particularly is that a lot of time we use liturgy sources that say "brothers and sisters." I am very intentional about saying "siblings." That's like a touch. Maybe someone notices it, maybe they don't. In political campaigns I have worked for, you get all this literature, TV. I heard once that there's seven touches, a person has to hear or read a candidate's name seven times or hear about their policy before it sinks in.

While Pastor Martha said that her personal ideology made her incredibly supportive of LGBTQ+ inclusion, likely even more than a majority of her congregation, it was not something she always put on full display when preaching. Instead, she explained to me that small, brief, and sometimes barely perceptible connections to LGBTQ+ issues in her sermons were meant to provide access points to a politically diverse congregation.

Martha noted that the effects of a non-confrontational *touches* technique sometimes surprised her in their effect on conservative members. To illustrate this, she recounted her first sermon which she preached on LGBTQ+ issues, specifically about her relationship with a gay relative and the journey her family took to fully accepting him. She was worried that because the topic of sexuality was going to be part of the sermon, some congregants would reject the message. She hoped she had obliquely mentioned LGBTQ+ issues in less direct ways enough in previous sermons to keep her listeners attuned to the story she wanted to tell:

The first sermon I gave, I thought 'This is going to be controversial, I'm going to stir some stuff up.' And somebody who was a Trump voter came up to me after and said "that's the best sermon I've heard in years." I try to have broad topics

that center on the scripture and tie into contemporary issues. It resonated with him even though we disagree.

Enough of these *touches* over a long period of time could lead to more conservative members becoming more comfortable with their churches being spaces that welcomed queer Christians. Several congregants who identified as politically conservative noted this comfort in interviews with me, with some adding that they had grown to deeply care on a personal level about their LGBTQ+ pew-mates and had become more approving of institutional care for LGBTQ+ people than they had been previously.

Attempting to eschew the political polarization which members commonly associated with state and national politics across the United States, each of the clergy I worked with made use of this “politics of non-confrontation,” indirectly referencing LGBTQ+ issues more often than preaching sermons that directly tackled the topic. In the process, clergy sacrificed the kind of directness or explicitness in calling attention to the kinds of prejudice and exclusion LGBTQ+ people often experience in the Church. But they worked to appeal to as broad a group of congregants as possible as they visioned their churches’ respective futures, without being accused of being “too political” in their motives. In doing this, they hoped to incite as little conflict as possible, while also showing the congregations the good work they could do despite their ideological differences.

2.6 The Whole Armor

Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians,

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand, therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of

righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:13-17).

The potential for conflict over LGBTQ+ issues is familiar to mainliners regardless of denomination, who have seen this conflict manifested in ecclesiastical and secular contexts alike, particularly after the more public and widespread organizing for queer civil rights in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. A key commonality between Christian practitioners in the United States, liberals and conservatives alike, is the presumption that sexuality is and should be among the central concerns of the faithful, whether or not that concern is to affirm or oppose non-heterosexual expressions of sexuality in Christian institutions (Griffith 2017, Sands 2000:60). While church members sometimes expressed surprise at the vehemence with which other Christians debated topics related to queerness, none expressed shock at LGBTQ+ inclusion being an origin-point for conflict.

Groups of affirming congregants in each church expressed willingness to make welcoming queer folks a priority for their congregations, even though they felt a looming sense of conflict and feared their efforts would be categorized on the political side of a politics/religion binary. Queer members of these groups – who spoke of overcoming painful and sometimes-violent conflicts with families, coworkers, friends, and previous religious communities – asserted that despite potential accusations that their advocacy for LGBTQ+ inclusion was distracting or inappropriate, they were willing to “fight” for recognition and acceptance as equal participants. In preparing for this “fight,” they often invoked similar imagery as the passage from Paul’s letter, “wearing” their previous negative experiences in religious institutions “like armor” to

protect them from any resistance to their striving for change. Many congregants who do not identify as queer make similar commitments to fight, and join a struggle for more equitable spaces, for both the queer people in their lives and for the good of their congregations overall.

The three congregations provide useful examples of how religious institutions work to strengthen their communities, manage or lessen internal conflict, and contest a boundary line between religion and politics. Through this work, they make claims on who belongs, and how to debate that belonging. In reckoning with whether queer folks belong in the pews, the choir loft, and the pulpit, they expose their power and their methodologies to include and exclude. Congregants so often decry politics as antithetical to the work of the church and associate politics with disconnection from the holy nature of their mission as Christian believers. When congregants do this, they delegitimize politics as something that does not warrant the attention of followers of Christ. This delegitimization, as Moon (2004) argues, allows members the opportunity to refuse debate any action on topics they would rather not consider. This leaves an existent status quo in place, which for LGBTQ+ Christians usually means continuing patterns of exclusion. In creating and modifying spaces to better welcome LGBTQ+ people, affirming mainliners must find ways to avoid their passionate pursuits being delegitimized while accomplishing their goals of more equitable spaces, thus breaking the status quo in a way that benefits queer parishioners.

While the three strategies I have isolated for discussion represent patterns of action that were present in the three congregations, there were certainly times when members in the churches approached the conundrum of “talking politics” in a different way. For example, Pastor Kenneth acknowledged, at least tacitly, in one of his sermons that issues congregants designated as political might lead to conflict. But he told the congregation that the connections between

religion and politics were such that those issues could not be avoided. In this way, he took a different stance from the ONA task force, who worked so hard within a conceptual framework where religion and politics were separate, and their actions were associated with growing in faith. Instead, Pastor Kenneth encouraged parishioners to “lean into” issues they might dismiss or avoid as “too political,” despite their trepidation, if doing so would result in greater equity for folks who were suffering. He was preaching on a passage in Matthew 21 in which Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem. While contemporary readers might find this act inspiring, he noted, “For everything wonderful Jesus does or says during his life, there is a person who feels he shouldn’t have done it or said it.” The action of overturning tables was a risk, he continued, the kind of risk that Christians should similarly take if the moment calls for it.

You cannot separate the sacred and the secular, because Jesus did not do that, He saw the sacred in everything. What would Jesus be doing now? Who are the outcasts of today? People with different sexuality, people who are different walks of life and we look down upon. Jesus walked into their lives and sat with them...those are the people we must reach out to today.

By explicitly mentioning “People with different sexuality,” Pastor Kenneth is making the argument that welcoming queer folks is a contemporary parallel to the ministry of Jesus. He is also stressing that while such acts might be controversial or even incendiary, there was likewise great controversy in Jesus’ actions and associations. Not everyone would unite around welcoming actions as necessary or appropriate. But if they were worth fighting for, the actions should proceed. He continued, “I’m not trying to preach politics. But Jesus was political. Keeping Jesus in an insulated spiritual place is not the correct thing to do.”

Pastor Kenneth presented a caveat that he did not enter the domain of the political lightly, but it is in that domain that issues which most affect marginalized people's lives can most readily be found. In his sermon, he not only associated welcoming of queer folks with "politics" – something many parishioners across the three churches frenziedly sidestepped to avoid conflict – but is going even further. He is arguing that to only concentrate on issues that parishioners frequently associate with the domain of the religious would represent a limited and even stifled view of what it means to be Christlike. This sermon is one example of a fine line that affirming parishioners walked when discussing LGBTQ+ inclusion as a priority, acknowledging the domains into which parishioners assigned issues. Overall, entreaties from affirming members not only suggested that LGBTQ+ issues did not comfortably fit definitively into either category—politics or church, nonreligious and religious—but rather occupied both domains. They insist that, despite fears of controversy, if members want to remain a relevant and engaged body of worshippers then they must interact with issues and topics that might be classified as "politics."

Chapter 3 “You Can Never Say That to a Fundamentalist:” Bible Studies, “Clobber Passages,” and Affirming Theologies

3.1 To Clobber or Not to Clobber?

Apart from a brightly colored and slightly garish stained-glass window that usually draws a sideways glance from those who see it, the library at St. Michael’s is an intimate, unassuming space. Over many hours spent in the room, I came to appreciate the window, enjoying the warm glow of red and yellow light it would cast as the afternoon sun began to set. With bookshelves lining the walls, several plants, and a timeworn Keurig which made harsh grinding noises when it dispensed coffee, the library was a favorite gathering spot for most of the small groups in the church. These included the church’s two weekly Bible studies and several reading groups. A group of six St. Michael’s members and I picked this room to hold a weekly reading group, sitting down with our drink of choice, an Oxford Annotated Study Bible, and our newly purchased book of choice, *Unclobber*.

The author, Colby Martin, had been serving as a Pastor of Worship and Arts at an Evangelical congregation in Arizona, when he made a Facebook post in 2011, applauding the repeal of the United States military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) policy (2016:38). This post led to his employment being terminated, and connections with his congregants were abruptly severed. Through conversations with his wife, Pastor Kate Christensen-Martin – who explained to Colby she did not believe queer individuals were living in sin – Martin came to adopt a similar view. In addition to his own personal narrative, *Unclobber* is primarily aimed at exploring the how the Bible is used to persecute queer people, and weaponized to deny them inclusion in

church life. Reading group members told me that book appealed to them for study because they, like Martin, were repulsed by attacks made against queer people, using the Bible as a weapon. A few group members were queer and had been targeted themselves. Biblical attacks against LGBTQ+ people are usually centered around six groups of verses which Martin colloquially refers to as the “clobber passages.” This title has gradually become popular in queer hermeneutics over the last decade as a shorthand for verses used to justify prejudicial behaviors. Of the over thirty-thousand verse of the Bible most congregants use in worship and study, these six passages are the prevalent evidence of scripture used to “clobber” (theologically condemn) LGBTQ+ people. Martin himself did not coin the term, which appears frequently in queer Christian chat rooms, blogs, and social media pages. Prior to reading the book, it was unfamiliar to the entire St. Michael’s reading group, including its queer members. “I’ve been clobbered with a few of them, but I’ve never heard the term,” Meredith noted in our first meeting with a halfhearted chuckle. When I asked at the outset of our meetings what the group hoped for as an outcome of reading the book, they replied that it might serve to strengthen their own theological arguments in favor of LGBTQ+ inclusion, so they could set an example for the rest of congregation, making the church even more inclusive.

In our fifth meeting, we gathered in the library on a freezing February morning to read through the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans and discuss Martin’s analysis of it from *Unclobber*. Our discussion had stalled. Members were puzzled by Paul’s use of the Greek words *para phusis* (“contrary to nature”), which anti-queer readings of scripture will often use to condemn intercourse between people of the same sex as sinful. Martin argues that readers should not confuse an unnatural act with an inherently immoral act, and labeling intercourse as against nature was simply to signal that the acts in question were not procreative (2016:132). Meredith

noted, “One of the things I like about this guy is that he knows his audience.” She continued that while she was enjoying the book as a progressive and out queer person, Martin primarily intended the book for theologically conservative Protestants who make anti-LGBTQ+ interpretations of scripture.

Meredith does not feel the Bible condemns her, but she knew many Christians do. She hoped Martin’s arguments would help those Christians around her to accept her more fully:

I’ve got to believe that if I present myself in a way that is palatable, and then they find out, “oh, she’s gay, I can love that person and hate her sin.” We’ve heard that bullshit forever! But Colby here has gone a step further in asking if being gay is really a sin? Is it not ok that I have a loving relationship, being born the way I was? He’s not trying to throw it out, he’s not saying “let’s just chuck this chunk of the Bible.” He’s putting it into a perspective that some of us use in not very articulate ways.

Meredith believed that Martin’s approach to re-interpreting passages of scripture would be the appealing to members of St. Michael’s who might disapprove of her sexual orientation because he hadn’t “chucked” any verses away. Instead, he had explained that the verses do not mean that gay identity is sinful. Ellen, another group member, agreed, telling the group the idea of disregarding the Romans 1 passage was foolish. “You can never say that to a fundamentalist, you have to do a reinterpretation.” Both participants stressed that they must learn to present a concise re-interpretation that does not disparage LGBTQ+ people. Such an approach, they reasoned, would be more theologically sound than claiming that the verses should be “cast aside.” The problem with this strategy, Ellen said, is that crafting a concise rebuttal to a clobber passage and replacing it with a more progressive affirming interpretation requires a substantial amount of labor. Despite that labor, the argument is not always articulated clearly or convincingly by proponents of inclusion.

As mainline churches debate LGBTQ+ inclusion, there is palpable tension between theological attacks against and defenses of LGBTQ+ inclusion in congregational and denominational activities. This tension is manifested through competing ways in which queer and non-queer mainliners use the Bible. As James Bielo writes, the complexity of the Christian scriptures is overwhelming. Bielo asks, “Is it the height of futility (or maybe daring), reserved for those in love with the impossible? Perhaps. Yet in the face of this (im)possibility, millions of people throughout the world read, interpret, apply, use, and otherwise engage with the Bible everyday” (2009:1). Since anti-queer forms of exegesis often serve as the foundation for denying queer folks’ equal access to church institutions, engagement with the Bible is inevitable. Affirming congregants often feel they must contest and/or reject “traditional” meanings associated with specific scriptural passages to mount a vigorous defense of the affirming spaces they are trying to create and preserve. Their arguments, and the theological positions they take relative to the Bible and sexuality/gender identity, refute or complicate claims that the Bible’s “clobber passages” unequivocally condemn LGBTQ+ people. The tension congregants grapple with as they read and debate the Bible together is not just between two competing forms of exegesis; to condemn and chastise queer folks or to affirm and liberate them. The tension also centers around how mainliners view the Bible and its authority in how they live their lives and exist within their church. Drawing from Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,” the question of *how* congregants exegete the texts in front of them must be joined to a broader question of *why* the scriptures matter in the context of congregants’ religiosity: “what roles did that scripture play” (1971:136).

Mainliners are divided on what kind of authority they should give scripture when reading, studying, and discussing it with others. Relationships to the Bible are often complicated,

nuanced, and multifaceted for each individual congregant. As I noted in Chapter 1, mainliners often take a stance on the Bible that neither lauds it as a perfect document, nor demands for it to be read with minimal historical and cultural contextualization. Rather, many congregants classify the Bible as a human-made resource, probably inspired by God but not written by finger of God. Even without these views on literalism and inerrancy that are so closely associated with evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, mainliners' interpretations of scripture still demonstrate what Smith calls the "dynamic" role the Bible plays in contemporary Christian life, and its role in influencing personal piety and a normative sense of what congregants should believe and do to be good and faithful Christians (1971:140).

Complicated and diverse views on scripture do not mean congregants fail to approach it with reverence, deep respect, and even a sense of awe. While we met to discuss *Unclobber* at St. Michael's, the group spent more time in the meetings scrutinizing biblical passages than reading Martin's chapters, which we did on our own time between meetings. The group was in all respects a Bible study, and members would bring their own copies of the Bible, pulling them out of their purses or bags. Most group members engaged in private reading and study alongside their group discussions, both to prepare for the discussions and to increase their own overall biblical knowledge. Most of the Bibles I saw congregants bring were weathered, with well-worn and dog-eared pages. Individual lines of text were highlighted or underlined in pencil or pen. A majority of congregants I interviewed told me the Bible was important to them, and that they had their own copy which they read regularly. Many talked about doing daily devotionals, reading the Bible over breakfast or as they prepared to go to bed at night. The few who did not claim to actively read and study the Bible expressed that they wanted to do a better job of it.

Reverence for the Bible and a willingness to deeply engage with it was especially true of the participants at Second Presbyterian's weekly Bible study: "First Look Over Lunch." Pastor Camille and a group of around ten parishioners would read the upcoming Sunday's sermon text and discuss its meanings and implications for their lives and the world at large. Most group members brought their own copies of the Bible, but the Sunday School room we met in also had a cabinet containing about two dozen other copies of the Bible, some more than fifty years old, in various translations. When dealing with a particularly thorny passage, one participant, Joe, would open the old metal doors of the cabinet and retrieve two or three different translations, to see if they could shed any light on the group's pondering. Participants were encouraged to pack a lunch to eat during the hour-long study, but on more than one occasion, members became so preoccupied with the discussion at hand that they forgot to eat or even unpack the food they had brought along.

I was drawn to small groups like this because they gave members a chance to articulate their relationships to Bible and construct theologies in support of LGBTQ+ people. But I also witnessed a deep investment in collaborative reading and interpretation that took place among members. Ethnographic studies of small groups, including Bible studies, prayer circles, and reading groups have brought attention to ways in which Christians work together in building a shared sense of spirituality and framing the sacred in their lives. Joel Robbins draws on Clifford Geertz' "Shifting Aims, Moving Targets: On the Anthropology of Religion" to consider what Geertz calls a move to "religious mindedness" or a more self-conscious religiosity in which practitioners are constantly working to remain practitioners (2005:12, 2019:17). Robbins argues that to be secure in one's religiosity, one must know about the religion and find ways of acquiring religious knowledge. Small groups are one such place where knowledge is gained, and

where members utilize the knowledge and expertise of the group. As Miriam Levering (1989) argues, the words of scripture not only hold symbolic power, but do the important work of bringing people of faith together for communal interpretation. Together, evangelicals and mainliners alike often form enclave communities and support one another in various ways (Bielo 2009, Davie 1995). Small groups are intended to be spaces where those processes can happen with the support of one's fellow parishioners. As Robert Wuthnow writes of small groups in *I Come Away Stronger: How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*, "Their members care for each other, pray with one another, work together on community projects, and spark vitality in religious institutions (1994:2). Wuthnow's view may seem highly idealized, but it was largely accurate in my own empirical observations of small groups in the three churches. Members displayed concern for one another's wellbeing. They took time to discuss health issues, family dynamics, or anxieties about happenings around the country. They often prayed together at the opening and closing of meetings, joining hands around the table. This care was most evident when individual members were absent, and multiple group mates would call them or send a text message asking if they needed a visit or a hot meal.

Parishioners shared with me that they often attended small group studies with goals of increasing their knowledge and to feel more connected to other congregants. Some would attend to "absorb the wisdom" of older members they perceived to have mastery of scripture. They also came to talk about issues in their lives, things they were celebrating or grieving. Members told me that these studies were among the most enjoyable church related activities they participated in. But the care congregants took in seriously engaging the materials in front of them suggests, as Bielo notes, that small groups studies cannot be reduced to an exercise in leisure (2009:13). When I traced the ways congregants used these groups to develop theologies of LGBTQ+

inclusivity, the stakes were significant in a way that corroborated Bielo's argument. The outcomes of the groups helped determine what kind of welcome the churches extended to queer members, and what kinds of commitments members had to changing their institutions.

Mainliners' theological engagement with Christian texts is by no means limited to the Bible in isolation. Many lay members have some familiarity with key theologians in Christian (and, more specifically) Protestant history: Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, or Knox for the Presbyterians especially. Relatively few members, however, had directly read the writings of these figures or had copies in their homes. Few laity claimed to actively read theological writing unless it had been assigned to them by a pastor or facilitator as part of a church book study. When these assignments were given, clergy tended to suggest writings by contemporary thinkers that held generally progressive theological views: Diana Butler Bass, Rob Bell, Rachel Held Evans, Brian McLaren, and Elaine Pagels. These reading groups were also a primary source of exposure for many lay members to the growing, vibrant genre of affirming LGBTQ+ theology by Evangelical writers. Works include not only Colby Martin's *Unclobber* (2016), but also Justin Lee's *Torn* (2012), Matthew Vines' *God and the Gay Christian* (2015), and Jeff Chu's *Does Jesus Really Love Me?* (2013). These blends of theology and memoir were written with lay conservative Christians in mind and join a growing literature in which queer people of faith and scholars alike explore the trajectories queer theology has taken, and the paths it continues to forge (Cheng 2011; Johnson 2014; Tonstad 2018; Wilcox 2020). Congregants stressed to me that while these various works are helpful to them, the Bible is set apart in the kind of authority it possesses to justify inclusion or exclusion. Miriam Levering concurs, arguing, "People do things with, and expect things from, these verbal traditions that they do not from other texts" (1989:2).

When congregants read and study the Bible, they join centuries of Christians who, Smith explains, “find reason to go on prizing and sacralizing it and responding to it” (1971:135).

Mainline Protestant congregations are an apt setting to explore how congregants use small groups to cultivate rebuttals to anti-queer exegeses, because there is little to no congregational or denominational pressure to follow tenets of biblical literalism or inerrancy in their exegeses. These are also spaces where different levels of knowledge among members is welcomed. Lay members are prone to disclosing (and apologizing for) a lack of substantial biblical knowledge and offering that as a caveat to their interpretations. In the Bible studies and small groups I attended, congregants often repeated multiple times in the same meeting they were not fully aware of how the Bible had been translated. Nor did they speak or write in its original languages. They were not sure why apocryphal books did not make the biblical canon. And they were confused by what they saw as discrepancies (both historical and theological) between writers of individual books. Instead of mandating a certain kind of reading style or view of scripture, group facilitators and clergy generally encouraged congregants to make use of their freedom from demanded or compulsory belief when reading and studying their Bibles. Exercising this freedom, leaders urged, could result in deepening faith, clarified beliefs, and getting better acquainted with the texts themselves. This sense of open-mindedness towards scripture, framed as not being out of disrespect for the text but out of deep reverence, also allowed for small groups where individual members held very different views on scripture’s authority. It gave freedom to literalists (and there were several in each church), and those who viewed to the Bible as infallible, to retain such beliefs and bring them to discussion. But for those who saw the Bible as a respected but flawed tool for spiritual betterment, this freedom also allowed them space to explore their relationships with the texts. Despite different views and the

disagreements they could produce, affirming members felt permitted to refute anti-queer readings of the clobber passages without fears that they would be criticized by anyone around them from straying from a “traditional” set of meanings.

By focusing on Bible studies and reading groups across the three churches, both those dealing with LGBTQ+ issues directly and those concentrating on other topics, I observed four strategies congregants used to dispute anti-queer readings of the Bible and use biblical texts as a tool for LGBTQ+ inclusion instead, which I will explore in the latter part of this chapter. These strategies complicate or undermine non-affirming interpretations of Biblical passages in which anti-queer Christians often find one of their most deadly weapons. Affirming parishioners use their rebuttals to argue that LGBTQ+ Christians are just as worthy of participation in church life and ministry as any other Christian. When determining how to talk about the Bible with those with whom they disagree, congregants weigh the kinds of labor and preparation they will need, and whether their method will be effective or further entrench opposition. Their primary hope is that by neutralizing the “clobber passages,” they can enact more inclusive and welcoming policies within their congregations without challenges that they are “violating” scripture.

3.2 The “Clobber Passages”

After beginning each meeting with prayer, the *Unclobber* group devoted a two-hour discussion to each of the six “clobber passages,” usually reading two or three chapters surrounding the passage for further background. While extensive commentaries by Dale Martin (2006) and Daniel Helminiak (1994) have focused specifically on these verses and elaborate their wider overall context within the biblical canon, I will provide brief summaries similar to those the St. Michael’s reading group developed as they read and studied. One conclusion the group came to early on in their meetings was that interpretations of the “clobber passages” (both

the “traditional” exegeses and Martin’s) focus on sexual orientation, through Martin uses the acronym “LGBT.” The group noted that while transgender, gender-nonconforming, and gender nonbinary individuals were frequently targeted by conservative Christians, the passages Martin concentrates on do not seem to apply to gender identity (though they also argued the verses did not provide an applicable condemnation of non-normative sexual orientations either).

The first passage is found in Genesis, when two angels visit the wicked city of Sodom and are persuaded to stay in the house of Lot, nephew of Abraham:

But he urged them strongly; they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” (19:3-5).

Lot begs the men to take his two virgin daughters instead of his guests, but the angels strike the men of Sodom with blindness, preventing the threatened gang-rape from taking place. The angels urge Lot and his family to leave the city, “For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it” (19:13). With Sodom being invoked in subsequent books of scripture (e.g., Isaiah 1:9, Lamentations 4:6, Ezekiel 16:46-58, and 2 Peter 2:6), including by Christ himself (notably Matthew 10:14-15, 11:23, Luke 10:12, 17:28-29), the sin(s) of Sodom are prevalent in the minds of Biblical writers. The Genesis account is included as a clobber passage by interpreting the story to mean that the desire of the men of Sodom to “know” – to have non-consensual intercourse – with the angels should be associated with homosexual desire. A typical anti-queer exegesis of the

Genesis passage is that the city of Sodom's sin, what made it so abhorrent in the eyes of God, is the homosexuality of its men and their desire for same-sex copulation with Lot's guests.

Of all the "clobber passages," this first one requires a bit more explanation at the outset than the others. This is because it comes under the most scrutiny for its relevance to discussions of queerness in Christian contexts. It is therefore rarely mentioned in affirming church contexts, with much more energy going towards the Leviticus and the New Testament passages.

Contemporary biblical scholars and many mainline clergy tend to agree that same-sex copulation is not the sin which Jesus and several of the prophets later decried, instead pointing to inhospitality, arrogance, or over-indulgence. But the term "sodomy" that is drawn from this passage is still used to denote a corpus of forbidden sex acts. Derrick Sherwin Bailey describes a symbiotic, self-sustaining relationship between the category of "sodomy" and the account of the destroyed city. "Sodomy" gets its name from this passage, and the "unnatural acts" popularly associated with the passage continue to be associated with Sodom – and Genesis – because of the name. (1955:9, Boswell 1980:93, Jordan 1997:31-37).

While Bailey's work is foundational to an understanding of how people have connected sexuality with the Sodom story, Mark D. Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* is equally indispensable. Jordan (1997) frames sodomy as both artifact and judgement, not synonymous with "homosexuality" and yet affecting the Christian theology surrounding same-sex desire and everything else it touches. The confusion Jordan associates with sodomy mirrors the uncertainty with which Foucault connects the amorphous category in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1978). Nonetheless, views concerning "sodomy" factor into the kinds of sexual politics which developed in concert with the establishment of Protestantism in Europe, as shown by Helmut Puff (2003). Views developed in the context of the Reformation and found their way

to the Americas, permeating the mainline institutions where the reading group members are located, even if sodomy is not a term members use. Jordan further argues that contradictions are so inseparable from the term, “the stuff from which it was made,” that it is advantageous to the kinds of oppressive legislative contexts in which it was invoked and thrived in the U.S. into the present day (1997:8-9). Chief among these contexts has been U.S. sodomy laws, which differ in terms of what sexual acts they prohibited (and between whom) from state to state. Such a lack of consensus is an empirical testament to Jordan’s argument that sodomy as a term is fundamentally untranslatable (1997:161). Michigan’s sodomy law was ruled unconstitutional in 2003 in the Supreme Court’s *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, well within the memories of group members, but remains on the books (Eskridge 2008:396-97). While the term “sodomy” and the account from Genesis have been fundamental in the way exegeses decrying same-sex desire have historically been developed, the inherent confusion the term conjures is in keeping with a growing capitulation among many Christians that this passage provides a shakier foundation to build anti-queer arguments than the other verses they could use instead.

The next “clobber passages” which are far more central to anti-queer readings of scripture than the Sodom story are found in the Levitical codes amid a list of prohibited sex acts and abuses. These include incest with various kin (18:6-18), adultery (18:20), child sacrifice (18:21), and bestiality (18:23). Also among these defiling acts, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22). The admonition concludes, “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves” (18:24). Most biblical commentaries interpret this to mean that forbidding these practices is intended to separate the Israelites from groups already dwelling in the land they intend to settle. A punishment comes two chapters later: “If a man lies with a male

as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” (20:13). From these verses, associations between homosexuality and the term “abomination” are often made.

In the New Testament, Paul’s letter to the Romans includes a clobber passage within a wider indictment of God’s wrath against wrongdoing. Paul begins, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). Though the wicked in question understand the truth of God, they are content not to honor God. They are therefore “given up” by God to various forms of impurity and degradation. Paul writes,

For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (Romans 1:26-27).

Unlike previous verses, this is the first to include women, making the passage especially popular in condemning lesbian relationships. Meredith joked in our first reading group meeting, “Most of the reference to biblical passages had to do with men, so we used to joke that lesbians were God’s anointed, free of all sin!”

The final clobber verses are found in two more of Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, both in lists of various sins. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes,

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified,

you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

And in 1 Timothy, Paul writes,

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 8-11).

While I have used the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of the Bible to present all scriptural passages in this dissertation, which is a favorite among mainliners, other translations of the Bible use quite different language regarding what the NRSV translates as “sodomites” or “male prostitutes.” The English Standard Version (ESV), a favorite among more conservative Reformed Protestant groups, translates “male prostitutes, sodomites” in 1 Corinthians as “men who practice homosexuality,” compressing the two Greek terms Paul uses into the category of homosexuality. While the NRSV commentaries take a relatively noncommittal position on same-sex relations in biblical texts, the ESV commentary is far more overtly anti-queer, noting, “these verses were understood as absolute prohibitions against all types of homosexual conduct.” Further, given Paul’s inclusion of the phrase “And this is what some of you used to be” (translated in the ESV as “and such were some of you”) in 1 Corinthians 6:11, the ESV commentary indicates “that homosexuals can change and become former homosexuals,” thus advocating “conversion” or “reparative” tactics.

3.3 Combatting the Clobber Passages:

Affirming mainliners regularly contest or reject anti-queer readings in their own interpretations of these passages. Most of the congregants I worked with expressed to me that they had had heard about passages which condemned LGBTQ+ people. While some could identify the books that contained them, most could not. If I placed a Bible on a table and asked for a precise location of the verses, few would be able to, apart from finding the Sodom story in Genesis. Most that could find the passages identified as queer, explaining that the verses had been quoted to them in a derogatory manner at some point. Despite not being able to find the locations of the passages, affirming congregants attested that they had generally been taught that the Bible contained anti-queer passages, and felt it was vital to be able to refute such interpretations. Doing so would not only undermine the anti-queer arguments that use scripture as a justification for discrimination, but would also show a respect for scripture and a willingness to engage critically with it. A Presbyterian named Gerald, who had grown up in a very conservative fundamentalist family but supported Second Presbyterian welcoming queer folks, summed up his willingness to engage scripture:

I think the discussions of inclusion should go, must go, to pinpoint issues scripturally. To help people resolve what I think is a wall between this issue and the church. People still say, 'How do you defend this? How do you defend LGBT people? The Bible says this!' To tear down that wall, we have to be able to say things scripturally.

Gerald visualized anti-queer exegesis of scripture as a wall, the primary barrier to most non-LGBTQ+ Christians embracing LGBTQ+ Christians. If inclusive arguments were to be made, Gerald reasoned, they must dismantle or scale this barrier, bringing resolution to a conflict of faith. The *Unclobber* group also wanted to dismantle barriers to inclusion, a key reason they

were interested in reading Martin's book. They felt they were called to do this, even though they were by no means "Bible experts." Bielo speaks to this in his own work, noting, "Men and women without formal training in biblical languages, hermeneutics, theology, and history approach the Bible with confidence, awe, bemusement, and suspicion" (2009:1). The group expressed anxiety at a lack of any sort of formalized training but discussed amongst themselves that they had just as much claim to read and study scriptures as those who would use the Bible as a weapon against queer folks. A lack of training, they reasoned, was not an excuse to refrain from studying scripture together.

Luann, retired public school teacher, choir member, an avid participant in various St. Michael's activities, was the *Unclobber* group's most punctual member. She shared her perspective on Christians who use scripture to condemn LGBTQ+ people, saying they have a "black and white" view of the holy texts. This precludes deeper interpretation, nuance, and the possibility that their supposed "literal" reading might be subject to their own implicit or explicit biases.

It's very black and white so they don't have to question any of [their interpretations]. I have a friend like that, and when I've tried to talk to her, it's so black and white. 'The Bible says this, the Bible says this.' That's why I wanted to read Colby Martin's book, so I had something. I told her that the words were interpreted, but I didn't know exactly how. If it's all black and white you don't have to think about it, and if it makes you uncomfortable, you still don't have to think about it because 'it says!'

By contrast, Luann said that she was more open to embracing flexibility and a sense of uncertainty when it came to interpretation. She did not know the "clobber passages" by heart, and "didn't know exactly" how they should be interpreted. But she was willing to learn and was open to their complex meanings. Luann's position is common among affirming mainline laity

who are not queer themselves. Beyond understanding that there are scriptural passages used to condemn LGBTQ+ people, they are unsure of how to argue effectively against such condemnation. This hesitancy comes primarily from a lack of familiarity with details of the passages themselves, and a realization of the labor involved in crafting a rebuttal to an anti-queer utilization of scripture.

As I noted above, I discerned four methods mainliners used responding to the “clobber passages.” These strategies comprise theological arguments that pro-LGBTQ+ mainliners often make, as a result of discerning their viewpoints in small group activities like Bible studies and reading groups. First, a method I will call the *misinterpretation strategy*, is like Colby Martin’s overall approach and that which the *Unclobber* group felt was optimal. The strategy relies on an argument that a passage has not been understood correctly, and its “traditional” anti-queer reading is inaccurate. Those using the passage to condemn LGBTQ+ people are misunderstanding the message the text and missing what the Bible’s writers were trying to convey to their intended audiences. This strategy places strong emphasis on biblical translation and the historical/cultural contexts in which individual books were written. The second strategy, calling out *cherry picking*, involves arguing that anti-queer Christians do not follow all the Bible’s injunctions and admonishments to the letter in their own lives. To focus on “clobber passages” is to “cherry pick” which parts of the Bible deserve special emphasis. The third strategy, which I call *Paul Was Wrong*, is the one which Meredith and Ellen were skeptical of in our reading group. It involves admitting that scriptural sources *do* indeed speak negatively about LGBTQ+ populations, and to use Ellen’s word, to “chuck” them. Other congregants used this strategy to claim that they find portions of scripture problematic for various reasons: they are queerphobic, racist, sexist, or justify of violence and cruelty. Its own form of “cherry picking,”

proponents argues that some verses are “wrong” and/or biased in light of their contemporary understandings of morality, and Christians cannot let first-century prejudices interfere with acting affirmingly towards LGBTQ+ people. The fourth strategy is also a form of “cherry picking,” not because it discards verses, but rather it strongly focuses on Jesus’ messages of love and inclusion in the gospels. In prioritizing these messages, proponents argue that Jesus’ commands supersede all condemnatory scriptures. While this final strategy is the broadest and the most abstract, it is also the most widely used by congregants. Involving less technical arguments, it requires the least extensive textual and contextual knowledge. It is therefore the argument many congregants feel they are most qualified to make.

3.3.1 The Misinterpretation Strategy

A misinterpretation argument, according to the *Unclobber* group, stresses that anti-LGBTQ+ Christians have incorrect understandings of key scriptural passages at the core of their theology. If a thorough second look is given to the translations of “clobber passages” from their original Greek and Hebrew, the argument goes, said passages either do not mean what many conservative Christians think they mean, or they are so ambiguous that an association with LGBTQ+ people is tenuous and irresponsible. The strategy relies on reading the texts in a way that is not traditionally “literalist.” Contrasting Vincent Crapanzano’s description of biblical literalism, interpreting the words of scripture as context-independently as possible, this alternate approach absolutely saturates the clobber passages in historical and cultural frameworks (2000:15). Congregants who use this strategy argue that most evident reading on an English translation of a passage is not always accurate. This undermines the notion of the biblical literalist being a capable final arbiter, what Randall Balmer describes as becoming one’s own theologian (2006:24-25).

The *Unclobber* group explored this strategy when they spent one of their meetings exclusively focused on Paul's vice list from 1 Corinthians, and its reference to (per the NSRV and ESV translations respectively) "male prostitutes/sodomites" and "homosexuals." Martin's analysis of the text reads "The words homosexuals and homosexuality have zero business being in the Bible," and this was the argument reading group members had in mind when interpreting this passage themselves (2016:157). Dale Martin and Daniel Helminiak have respectively shown in their work that the interpretation of this passage as a reference to homosexuality wholly relies around two ambiguous Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenkoitai*. Both words, they argue, present significant drawbacks to reinforcing anti-queer arguments. As John Boswell notes in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*,

The first of the two, 'malakos' (basically, 'soft'), is an extremely common Greek word; it occurs elsewhere in the New Testament with the meaning 'sick' and in patristic writings with senses as varied as 'liquid,' 'cowardly' ... 'delicate,' 'gentle,' and 'debauched.' In a specifically moral context it very frequently means 'licentious,' 'loose,' or 'wanting in self-control.' At a broad level it might be translated as either 'unrestrained' or 'wanton,' but to assume that either of these concepts necessarily applies to gay people is wholly gratuitous. The word is never used in Greek...in reference to homosexual acts generically, and it often occurs in writings contemporary with the Pauline epistles in reference to heterosexual persons or activity (1980:106-107).

Boswell attempts to disassociate the first Greek term in question from homosexuality by listing the other ways it can possibly be used. He argues that intrinsically associating *malakoi* with the homosexual sex act is not a responsible interpretation. With Colby Martin adding that the term is just as likely to be used to describe "soft" fabric as "soft" people, Boswell's, Helminiak's, and Dale Martin's arguments are similar in that a common interpretation of this term as denoting a

passive homosexual partner is far too narrow and specific. If the term refers to softness and looseness, it could instead reference a wider moral failing which all people are susceptible to. It therefore should not be used to condemn same-sex desire. As they considered this information, group members came up with their own comparisons for the ambiguous use of the Greek word. “It would be like using ‘hard’ to describe someone today” said Jane, as she leafed through her copy Martin’s book. “That doesn’t imply a gender or a sexual orientation at all!”

With the first term unpacked, the group moved to the second. *Arsenkoitai* is more ambiguous and far less commonly used in the lexicon of scripture, making it harder for scholars to define it. Helminiak notes that previous attempts at translation it have focused on the two parts of the word separately. “*Arseno-* refers to men, male humans, plain and simple. *Koitai* comes from the word that means bedroom or bed and refers to ‘lying’ with – that is, have sex with – someone” (Helminiak 1994:89). This separation, which amounts to “men bedrooms” or “men who have sex with someone” is commonly inferred to denote the active homosexual partner who penetrates during sex, while *malakoi* are the recipient of this penetration. “‘Man beds?’ How the heck do they [those who make anti-queer exegeses] get ‘gay’ out of ‘man beds’,” Meredith said, puzzled. Dale Martin shares Meredith’s skepticism and declares this method of getting meanings from component parts of the word highly impractical. He gives the examples of the English words *understand* and *chairman*. These words respectively do not mean “standing under” or reference a literal chair. Understanding *arsenkoitai* by breaking it apart in this way has, Martin argues, led to grossly negligent mistranslation. None of these scholars can say definitively what *arsenkoitai* means, even granting that perhaps in the time it was written it could have referred to sexual acts between partners of the same sex. Given how little the word is used in either the New Testament or literature from Antiquity in general, definition through comparison is nearly

impossible. They assert, however, that the term most likely refers to exploitation through sex, with that sex not necessarily being between partners of the same sex.

After pouring through multiple analyses of *malakoi* and *arsenkoitai* from Colby Martin, their biblical commentaries, and additional resources they searched for on their smartphones, the group concluded that that the text from 1 Corinthians was too ambiguous to be associated with LGBTQ+ people. Instead of trying to graft a category like “gay” or “homosexual” into the Bible, it would be more productive to better understand sex – and sexual orientation – in the first century C.E. Roman world, to gain a better understanding of Paul’s writings. I had brought along copies of several books along to the sessions, at the request of the group that we all share resources we found related to this topic. One book I brought along was John R. Clarke’s *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250*. In addition to several salacious photographs of erotic Roman wall painting and sculpture, the book gives helpful overviews to concepts such as pederasty or temple/cult prostitution, phenomena which Colby Martin discusses as common in the Greco-Roman context of the New Testament. Members’ eyes widened around the table as Meredith gingerly flipped the pages of the book, with a giggle erupting every few seconds. Two men engage in an intimate moment in low relief sculpture on a silver cup from the early Roman Empire. Three individuals copulate in a fresco from the Suburban Baths in Pompeii, buried in ash in 79 C.E. No laughter came from Meredith, however, who noted that she had formal training in art history and was used to these kinds of erotic images.

Meredith cautioned that while images of “startling” sex acts between people of the same sex might appear pornographic to members of the reading group, such images “had different layers of meaning for the people who made them which we will never fully understand.” A

group of Michigan Episcopalians might find the images scandalous, cautiously glancing at them under the glow of fluorescent lighting in a church library. But, Meredith continued, just as the Bible's contemporaries might understand "malakos" in a different way, the images also might not have been met with the same reaction by Romans at the time (Clarke 1998; McClure 2002). Perhaps some Roman viewers also tittered at the erotic content as well, but this was largely in the realm of conjecture. Meredith did not think that Romans had an entirely blasé or permissive stance toward sex, given sources she had read in college stressing the contrary. But Roman understandings of sex/sexuality were different from their own, and the group's interpretations of the sex acts or sexual pairings based on their own upbringings were irrelevant to the original context. To apply a contemporary lens to the biblical passages in question was equally erroneous. Group members shook their heads, noting that this might be an important point to stress when talking about the "clobber passages" more generally. With the interpretations they found misleading and erroneous interpretations dismissed, the group found no basis for using ancient writings to make a moral judgement on queer identity.

Many pro-inclusion mainliners who have devoted time to having conversations about the Bible with others attest that focusing on the misinterpretation of biblical passages as Colby Martin does should be the most intellectual, logically watertight, and desirable strategy for dialogue with non-affirming Christians. But they lament that the strategy "rarely lands," and does not "work" in terms of changing minds. Despite the positive aspects affirming Christians associate it with reinterpreting the clobber passages, it is rarely used in practice. Of all the interviews with parishioners I conducted, less than five members across the three congregations claimed to have ever made a misinterpretation argument regarding the exegesis of the "clobber passages" to a conservative counterpart. None of those who had claimed to have changed the

minds of those they debated. Although *Unclobber* group members reasoned that this strategy would be effective, interviews with them in the months after the reading group concluded found them disappointed that they had not been able to change minds as they had planned.

Going this route is frequently undercut and/or is perceived as unsuccessful for two reasons. First, the unwillingness of conservative Protestants to change their overarching view on the authority of scripture, and the systems of meanings and habitual interpretations that they have grown up learning. Second, and related to the reading group's worry that they could not successfully explain the interpretations of a specific passage by parsing Greek or Hebrew terms, was the amount of labor required to become familiar enough with scripture to make effective and convincing arguments. Members feared that their alternative interpretations of key scriptures would not seem articulate enough because they simply did not "know" enough about the topics at hand. Because of these factors, progressive members often failed to make arguments that highlighted misinterpretation at all. The impulse to use such an argument was outweighed by the concerns that came with it, even at the prospect of presenting substitute readings of the "clobber passages" which would be less harmful to LGBTQ+ people.

Meredith articulated the first reason in a reading group meeting, arguing that an understanding that biblical writers are referring to "gay people" might be just too deeply ingrained to break.

Sometimes I wonder if the fear of folks who are stuck with literal interpretation of this, if they're afraid of what their belief system would become if they if they let loose of this? And I question it. What else are they going to hold on to?

Meredith's belief that changing one's mind about a biblical perspective was akin to jettisoning something precious and long held. Pastor Camille at Second Presbyterian shared a similar view, and was fond of using the analogy of a rock-climbing wall. A Christian seeker represents the

climber, and a “literal” or “traditional” interpretation of scripture might well serve as an important handhold on a steep section of the wall. “If you are taking away that handhold, you need to give them another to grip,” she noted. “Otherwise, they fall.”

Crapanzano argues that fundamentalists “have little patience with arguments that suggest that meaning is socially constructed” or “that interpretations are never fixed, result from the coincidence of ‘passing theories’ of understanding, or are the consequence of dialogical encounters with whatever is to be interpreted” (2000:18). A lack of fixedness does not suggest a contrary reading of a passage could have merit. Instead, it conveys an overall failure by the “liberal” interpreter to treat scripture with the reverence it is due. “Indeed, the Fundamentalists themselves argue that these modernist and postmodernist arguments are symptoms of the confusion that results from a failure to regard Scripture as foundational – as God-given, and therefore absolutely authoritative” (Crapanzano 2000:18). By Crapanzano’s reasoning, if an *Unclobber* group member proposed an interpretation of the 1 Corinthians passage which was not the kind of blanket condemnation of “homosexuals” found in the ESV translation or other fundamentalist commentaries, that fundamentalist would likely not view the alternate interpretation as an argument made in with a desire for a fuller understanding of scripture. Instead, the alternate interpretation would be a diabolical pitfall, a snare intending to draw a faithful Christian away from God and a “true” understanding of God’s Word. A claim of misinterpretation could be ignored if it could be dismissed as an appeal to confusion and doubt, undermining a Christian’s confidence in God. Once a parishioner equates the reinterpretation of a passage in any way with doubting God, the argument for reinterpretation is unsuccessful. This was certainly true of more conservative congregants in the three churches, who told me they had “traditional” views of scripture and were reluctant to change the interpretations they had grown

up with. Even though attempts had been made to talk to them about different interpretations, they wanted to retain the ones they had, even if they had grown to love their queer pew-mates. They still did not want to be potentially led astray.

The second drawback was related to the labor involved. There was a pervasive worry by affirming parishioners that they were incapable of adequately providing a new “hand-hold” that would prevent the destabilization of a conservative fellow member’s faith. They feared their arguments would not be thorough, concise, or demonstrate enough biblical knowledge. The *Unclobber* group spoke frequently about what would be involved in becoming familiar with the biblical canon and its content. This was not even to mention familiarity with biblical translations from the original Greek and Hebrew to English, knowledge of Roman sexual practice and how it might have affected the views of someone like Paul on sex, and Christian history as it related to queer populations with the development of concepts like “sodomy.” Knowledge of each of these topics, in addition to an alternate interpretation of the specific clobber passage, could be needed to make a convincing argument. This knowledge would also have to be called forth at a moment’s notice, under pressure of confrontation, in a way that was persuasive and efficient. Inversely, progressive congregants assumed that conservative readers of scripture had the kind of “chapter-and-verse” knowledge they lacked, and were thus much more equipped to counter their arguments about scriptural interpretation. An *Unclobber* group member named Sharon noted,

I need more education on how to talk to people. I read *Unclobber* and I totally am convinced, but I am not very good about remembering the talking points, so that when I have a conversation, I could say what the Bible really means. I was in the book club, I read it. But I still don’t feel equipped to talk about it to someone convinced that it’s wrong.

Sharon demonstrates two assumptions in her reply. First, she says she still possesses inadequate knowledge of the scriptures in question to refute an anti-queer reading of a “clobber passage” – even though she had read and studied *Unclobber* and the relevant biblical passages. Second, in a hypothetical discussion with someone opposed to LGBTQ+ inclusion, she assumes that person will have enough familiarity with Bible to be convinced by their own interpretation. She was not alone in these assumptions, with some of the congregations’ most progressive members lamenting that they had not made scriptural arguments that refuted queerphobic readings in favor of LGBTQ+ inclusion. This became a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy since it was reported to so rarely change minds, and the frequency of its deployment by affirming members was very low.

3.3.2 “Cherry Picking”

In lieu of a misinterpretation strategy, which congregants found was rarely successful, they sought other arguments which could be used to neutralize anti-queer readings of the “clobber passages.” I first observed an alternate strategy in one of the many emails congregants sent me during my fieldwork, usually with links to current events, but also with film or television clips related to religion and LGBTQ+ issues. The selection of clips they sent was broad, ranging from popular queer-themed shows like the FX drama *Pose* to the LOGO/VH1 competition *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. They also sent trailers and clips from documentaries which explicitly focused on Christianity and queer life, such as the 2007 documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So*. One YouTube clip that reached my inbox more than once was from “The Midterms,” an episode of the 1990s-2000s drama series *The West Wing*. In this clip, President Josiah Bartlett (played by Martin Sheen), enters a crowded room and attempts to speak to those within, but is distracted by Dr. Jenna Jacobs (Clare Yarlett), who remains seated as the rest of the room stands. Bartlett comments on Jacobs’ conservative radio program with sarcastic disdain in his voice, saying “I

like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination.” “I don’t say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President, the Bible does,” Jacobs replies, citing Leviticus 18:22. Bartlett responds:

Chapter and verse! I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I’m interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery, as sanctioned by Exodus 21:7. She’s a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it ok to call the police? Here’s one that’s really important, cause we’ve got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean, Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John, for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you?

As instrumental music swells at the end of Bartlett’s speech, Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) approaches Jacobs and adds one final jab by removing an hors d’oeuvre from her plate, saying “I’m just gonna take that crab puff.” Jacobs is both eating crab and wearing a silver crab broach, both references to Leviticus 11:12, which forbids eating the flesh of crabs and other shellfish: “Everything in the waters that does not have fins or scales is detestable to you.” The implication of this entire exchange is meant to showcase not only Jacobs’ hypocrisy, but more widely the inconsistency of those who rely on passages like those in Leviticus to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people. Jacobs calls homosexuality an abomination while committing what the same book has called a detestable action.

This clip is such a favorite in email listservs because it typifies another common strategy, calling out biblical “cherry-picking” by anti-queer Christians. It points out how they ignore biblical passages that might implicate them in some way, while paying undue attention to clobber passages. This is not necessarily a critique of overlooking parts of scripture. That is something affirming mainliners admittedly do themselves, which I discuss in the context of the third and fourth strategies. Rather, it is about intentionally selecting verses to cause harm or to shame LGBTQ+ people. Those who would use the Bible to condemn LGBTQ+ people are strategically selecting biblical passages to fit a narrow argument, “picking” them out of their wider context. If anti-LGBTQ+ Christians scrutinize Leviticus 18:22, prohibiting lying with men, why is the rest of Leviticus not placed under equal scrutiny? Why is only a verse that is being weaponized against LGBTQ+ people being selected for use? Such Christians, affirming mainliners often argue, will then engage in downplaying or ignoring verses which might contradict or complicate anti-queer arguments. Or they neglect aspects of their own lives which are sinful or distasteful, according to a literally interpreted Bible (as President Bartlett notes in *The West Wing*). “Essentially, they are being inconsistent,” a Nazareth congregant named Perry told me in an interview, arguing that anti-queer Christians cannot claim they are simply following a literal reading of scripture in making condemnations if they only pay attention to certain portions of the Bible. “That kind of cherry-picking is hypocritical, it’s do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do.”

This accusation of hypocrisy represents a wider critique many mainliners make of biblical literalism. The critique revolves around the insincerity more progressive Christians associate with conservative claims that they are structuring their lives and worldviews around a literal interpretation of the Bible. “I don’t understand how anyone could take it literally and live

that way, and I think that most people who think they take it literally don't live that way, thank you very much! You can see them fall from grace every few years on television," said Meredith in an *Unclobber* meeting. Other participants chuckled and started to give examples. While a few well-known Christian leaders were directly named, most of the group spoke more abstractly, constructing an archetypical behavior of the hypocritical conservative Christian. Televangelists, self-help authors, and other clergy who preached anti-queer sermons to thousands of worshippers, Sharon noted, could easily find themselves replete with their own scandals.

One minute you scold parents who respect their kids' pronouns, or you blame lesbian couples for a flood or a tornado or a dip in the stock market, and the next minute you're in front of a row of microphones at a press conference talking about your Ashley Madison profile, or drugs, or that callboy you met!

After we all giggled at Sharon's reference to a "callboy," Meredith added that the transgressions need not be so sensational. Many respected Christian figures engage in behaviors which a literal reading of Christ's words in the gospels would critique: personally profiting off others' religious devotion, neglecting the poor and the marginalized to appeal instead to the rich and connected, and serving as media pundits or sycophants to particular secular authorities for their own advancement.

3.3.3 Paul was Wrong!

Prior to Nazareth's ONA vote, task force member Penny and I attended a talk with David Gushee, a Christian ethicist and former president of the American Academy of Religion. Gushee discussed his recent book, *Changing Our Mind: A Call from America's Leading Evangelical Ethics Scholar for Full Acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church*, which received highly polarizing reactions from his more fundamentalist colleagues. Part of the

negative reaction came from Gushee's analysis of the "clobber passages" in his book. Much like Colby Martin, Gushee frames his biblical analysis around his own interpretive issues with each of the passages. Gushee pleads with religious progressives, however, to refrain from using terms like "clobber passages," as it may alienate well-meaning Christians who misinterpret the Bible without malicious intentions (2015:56). Penny hoped Gushee would share some wisdom at the event she could use in convincing her fellow congregants to vote for the ONA covenant. She also hoped he could suggest strategies for her to use in talking about the Bible.

Penny and I took our seats near the front of the sanctuary of the church where the event was being held, as light from the setting sun outside streamed through the stained-glass windows and cast red and blue geometric shapes across the pews. Penny listened intently to Gushee, occasionally taking notes in a small notebook she had brought along. When his talk concluded, Gushee agreed to take a few audience questions. Given his focus on the questionable interpretation methods used on the "clobber passages," it is little surprise that he received a request for clarifying the passages in Romans and 1 Corinthians. He stressed that Paul's meanings had been clouded or misconstrued by later readers, a misinterpretation argument similar to the one we so often discussed in the *Unclobber* group. Amid a lengthy explanation that contemporary Christians needed to better attune to what Paul was *really* trying to say, one member of the audience interrupted to retort, "maybe Paul was just wrong!"

A second or two of tense silence ensued, when no sound reverberated within the darkened, high-ceilinged sanctuary. Then, audience members began to clap in assent. The speaker, who identified himself as a "liberal Christian," continued that perhaps Paul is referencing homosexual sex acts and condemn same-sex attraction. But, he continued, Paul's animus was simply mean-spirited. Paul certainly was not always kind in his epistles and writes

favorably of slavery and subjugation of women. These positions were wrong, the speaker told Gushee, and they are not prejudices contemporary Christians should rush to replicate, even if they had respect for Paul. Gushee responded as if he had heard this argument many times, that while the speaker's point was well-taken, it is not one that many evangelicals and fundamentalists would embrace magnanimously. To some, it might even seem heretical, and counter to their core beliefs about the inerrancy of scripture.

This third approach to constructing LGBTQ+ affirming theology involves declaring certain passages within the Bible as problematic, oppressive, or queerphobic. Such an approach inevitably brings the criticism that affirming mainliners are doing their own "cherry picking." They are selectively avoiding the "true" interpretations of verses to be "woke," to be "politically correct," or to coddle queer folks. Labeling sections of the Bible "wrong" or "irrelevant" and rejecting them, the argument goes, conveniently avoids engaging texts that would verify that being LGBTQ+ is sinful. Many affirming members, however, do not see themselves as "cherry picking" because they do not believe that the whole text of the Bible ought to be viewed as inherently useful for instruction. They are under no obligation to use the whole of scripture. For example, Meredith told the *Unclobber* group about her relationship to the Bible:

I didn't grow up with the Bible, I didn't read it as a child...it wasn't forced upon me so I came to my own conclusion. It makes sense that this is based on things that have shifted and filtered through many many different minds and educations and lenses. So does that mean I don't believe any of it? No. Does it change my faith? It's a guide.

Meredith argues that the Bible has passed through multiple layers of translation and interpretation, rather than coming directly from God. But this belief has not caused her to discard the Bible altogether from her faith formation. She believes it to be a useful guide for her faith.

Pointing out sections of the Bible that they find problematic can be a way some Christians find the text useful in growing their faith. They believe it shows a deep commitment to Christianity by discerning what behaviors and paradigms they want to replicate in their own lives, and (importantly) what they wish to eschew. Scriptural passages that appear to advocate for, condone, or glorify violence (military and sexual), slavery, misogyny, or other forms of oppression are frequently cited as instances in which the Bible “gets it wrong.” Pointing this out does not undermine the “guide” status of the Bible as Meredith framed it. Statements of disagreement might be bold and overt, with congregants saying, “I don’t like this passage because...” Expressing discomfort might take a subtler approach: “...this worries me because...”

A St. Michael’s member named Jacob, for example, noted in an interview that what he interpreted as “a strong sense of militarism” in certain parts of the Bible did not appeal to his understanding of Christianity. Jacob told me he is a pacifist and had protested against the Vietnam War. He tries to live into Jesus’ command to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39). But, he continued, there are areas of the Bible that contradict this sentiment and make him uncomfortable. One is the title of God as “Lord of Hosts” (Psalm 103:21).

’Lord of Hosts’ sounds like He is a war god. You know, this is not the God I understand, and I don’t think this is the God that Jesus looks upon, his Father being a God of Hosts that’s going to lead armies. I can bypass a lot of that stuff. It’s not pushing it out of the way. Nobody follows every word in here.” Because Jacob did not approve of war under any circumstances, he did not approve of mentions of it in scripture either.

Jacob did not stop reading the Bible because he read “Lord of Hosts” and became disgruntled. Rather, in his feelings of unease, he grew more secure in his understanding of who Jesus is, and

how Jesus views God. However, he admits that he tries to avoid passages in his personal devotions that he sees as promoting military violence.

A more extensive example of congregants finding parts of scripture distasteful occurred at a Second Presbyterian reading group. On a warm April evening, I met a deacon named Dorothy in the church parking lot. Dorothy is a powerhouse. She is involved in many of the church's activities both on Sundays and weekdays alike. She is a deacon, she sings in the choir, volunteers in the church's many service projects, and has seminary training. This makes her a fantastic conversation partner when talking about theology. Pulling a bag of her biblical translation books and a crock pot with chicken stewed with leeks and peppers out of the car, we carried the items into the social hall. Over the next ten minutes, seven others filed in, bringing enough food from the local Meijer grocery store for a small buffet-style meal: chicken wings, cheese cubes, a loaf of bread, potato salad, and sparkling water. We ate and talked for a few minutes with a new participant, who Dorothy and the other deacons had helped find an apartment in the town to lease. As the rest of us nibbled on food, Dorothy stood up and walked to the white board on the wall. She wrote "Genesis 34" on the board. She told us that we would be talking about the abduction of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, and the subsequent sacking of Shechem by the sons of Jacob. For several weeks, Dorothy had been leading a book study of *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, by Jonathan Kirsch, an American attorney and writer. The book commentates on "seven surprising and even shocking stories from the Bible," all from the Old Testament (1997:12). These include the Sodom story and the subsequent incest between Lot and his two daughters (Genesis 19), the murder of general Sisera by Jael, who penetrates his skull with one of her tent pegs (Judges 4-5), Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judges 11), and the brutal rape and murder of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). Dorothy

admitted she picked the book because the content would make readers uncomfortable. “These are not the usual Sunday School stories,” she said. But, she continued, the stories are part of the Bible nonetheless. In the book, Kirsh argues against censorship of these stories, which display “the ragged edges of human behavior” (1997:9). “You don’t have to agree with what happens,” Dorothy said, “we’ll read, and then decide for ourselves how to feel. These stories may upset you. You will find the violence vile and horrifying.”

Dorothy liked details and could always be counted on for theatrically getting the group acquainted with Bible stories which were obscure in the overall canon. Introducing the story of Dinah in Genesis 34, Dorothy began by noting, “Jacob has, count them, 4 wives,” and they are a “minority population” in the land of Canaan. Her introduction took about 20 minutes, and she asked Lawrence, a regular member, to open his Bible and read the entire chapter. In addition to his famous twelve sons, Jacob has at least one daughter, Dinah. In this chapter, Dinah travels to the city of Shechem near where Jacob has pitched his tents. The prince of the city, also named Shechem, abducts and violates Dinah. When Shechem and his father, Hamor, approach Jacob and his sons asking for Dinah’s hand in marriage, Dinah’s brothers trick their would-be in-laws, giving the condition that all men in the city must be circumcised. When this had been done, and every man in the city was weak and in pain, Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi entered Shechem and killed every man. They plundered the city’s livestock and wealth, taking the women and children of the city as captives. When Jacob rebukes his sons for the discord they have caused, they respond that Shechem had treated Dinah like a harlot.

When he finished reading, Lawrence broke the resulting contemplative silence by making a joke: “How would Jacob’s family would know the men of Shechem were not circumcised? Did they check?” A few participants laughed weakly. I nervously bit down on a cheese cube. I asked

whether it would be displeasing to God that the covenant of circumcision is being used to trick the men of Shechem in the interest of murder and theft by Jacob's sons, acts prohibited by the ten commandments? Dorothy did not answer, saying that my question would be answered in a later week, and instead moved to the topic of intermarriage, which she said the family of Jacob did not want for Dinah. She also brought up how Dinah appears to vanish from her story, and she is left wondering if Dinah was willingly staying with Shechem. Dorothy continued, "So is this a story about rape? Or is this a story about the taking over of the land and the rape story that justifies it?" The group murmured and some members simply sat back in their chairs and continued to eat, listening rather than contributing. Dorothy had broached a topic they did not want to discuss. Dorothy explained that a point she wanted participants to take away was that Dinah's rape is used as an excuse for violence and is not treated as repugnant in its own right as sexual violence. The group nodding in agreement. "None of which was her fault," Dorothy said, noting that Dinah is described to have been abducted and raped while she was "visiting the daughters of the land." Here the conversation turned sour, however, as a participant joked, "She's living on the edge." Dinah, the participant explained, had ventured outside her allotted location in the camp of Jacob. Perhaps she was giving the impression she was promiscuous? The group sat in stunned and uncomfortable silence, until I suggested that this last statement appeared to blame Dinah for her abduction. Lawrence disagreed, saying "Well it's probably her fault because she went out among the townspeople." Dorothy agreed with me that such statements were examples of victim-blaming, and she continued that the statements were no different than blaming a contemporary sexual assault on the clothing or alcohol consumption of the survivor. "Obviously Dinah's being naughty," Lawrence retorted defensively, trying to force

a smile. But seeing others sitting around the table were becoming visibly disturbed, he sheepishly added, “I’m kidding,” and stopped talking.

This incident may appear to have little to do with LGBTQ+ issues, but it is a particularly heated example of how mainliners grapple with sections of the Bible that deeply trouble them. Declaring that the passages are “wrong” (not constitutive of behaviors they want to replicate) did not mean they refused to read. In Dorothy’s small group, engagement with these texts led to a conversation about misogyny, sexual consent, and ethnic violence, precisely because the group found the content problematic. While the class ended in an argument, participants generally agreed the biblical narrative had a demeaning tone toward Dinah. Some members later told me in interviews that studying these passages and exploring their uncomfortability helped in their studies of biblical perspectives on LGBTQ+ issues. If they could argue that the biblical treatment of figures like Dinah was unfair and damaging, they reasoned, was not the treatment of queer people based on the Bible equally damaging? Why could they not just as easily argue that admonitions written in Leviticus or Romans which seemingly referred to men who had sex with men did more harm for marginalized people than good?

I asked members in interviews what scriptural passages made them most uncomfortable. Interviewees overwhelmingly discussed passages imploring enslaved people to obey masters, such as Ephesians 6. When they encountered these verses in their reading – which had been used to justify bringing masses of enslaved people to the British North American colonies, and then justify keeping enslaved people in bondage in the burgeoning United States – members felt they were undeniably “wrong.” Not taking a stand and saying these verses were “wrong” could help further perpetuate wrongs, they reasoned. Taking a neutral or silent position on the verses did not seem to be an option either. As Annie Woodley Brown (2019) argues, these verses gave

Christian institutions which might not overtly support slavery a means to abstain from taking abolitionist positions as slavery was baked into the U.S. Constitution, and eventually served as a means to justify Southern secession prior to the Civil War. Members reasoned that racism continues to persist in the U.S. even if slavery does not. Therefore, passages that reference slavery affirmatively could continue to have a hand in racism remaining systemic, including within mainline institutions. The overwhelming presence of slavery and other forms of nonconsensual subjugation in the Bible can serve to normalize systems of inequality which continue into the present day. This is, unless, the passages are questioned, critiqued, and “called out.” The overwhelmingly negative attitude among mainline congregants toward such verses is vital to an understanding of LGBTQ+-affirming exegesis as well. Rejecting these verses, which might include refusing to laud them as instructive in sermons, Bible studies, or personal devotions, provides a rationale for similarly rejecting passages which seem to condemn LGBTQ+ people, since those passages are used to deny civil rights and participation in the Church.

3.3.4 Children of God, Beloved of Christ

A fourth strategy – the most popular form of affirming theological arguments which congregants of the three churches used – claims that the Bible is ultimately a provocation to love. Members place exclusive focus on the Bible’s, and especially Jesus Christ’s, messages of compassion, acceptance, and community. An emphasis on love negates any condemnation the Bible may have of queer folks and deemphasizes the question of whether the “clobber passages” refer to queer folks or not. Members note that when they privilege these paradigms, they are “cherry picking” in a sense, but not in a way that will cause harm or promote exclusion. Instead, they seek to promote harmony among Christians and advance a commitment to social justice.

They argue that there are certain paradigms and commands in the Bible which supersede the rest, pointing to Christ's teaching that the greatest commandments, to love God and neighbor, encompass the law and the prophets (Matthew 22). Care and devotion to one's neighbors, in this case LGBTQ+ neighbors, is intrinsically tied to the love for and worship of God. It is therefore seen as key to dutiful Christian vocation.

Nazareth's ONA task force – including several members of Nazareth's leadership council – took this approach in a series of classes they ran for the congregation before their vote. The task force's co-chair, Jordan, started the classes by giving brief overviews of each of the “clobber passages.” She provided a handout of the passages, with notes on interpretation, translation, and the ambiguity surrounding them. But she told the group to set their handouts aside, saying “There is so much more to the story than these verses. Christ himself had nothing to say about sexual and gender minorities in his recorded words.” She spent the rest of the class focusing on other passages, mostly from the teachings of Jesus in the four gospels. She said that these other passages promoted inclusivity, respect, and love for marginalized people. Any biblical understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, Jordan stressed, must not be limited to an apologetic for “clobber passages.” Though it was important to have basic knowledge of those verses, she felt a rebuttal could not be effectively mounted only by taking a defensive stance. The best approach to making a biblical case for inclusion, she countered, involved adding biblical passages to the conversation which stress what she called “the belovedness of all people as God's children.”

At St. Michael's, Mother Sophia's also worked to add biblical passages she viewed as promoting love and justice to congregants' scriptural repertoire. She framed her weekly Bible study around a devotional resource booklet titled *The Social Justice Bible Challenge*. Edited by Episcopal priest Marek Zabriskie, the book focused on passages that advocated care for the poor,

immigrants, refugees, and other vulnerable or marginalized groups. Mother Sophia told the group that “knowledge of God’s word” should be used as a means to “protect God’s people.” Within God’s word, she continued, there are ample examples that compassion is due to marginalized people. One passage from this devotional resource which she spent a whole session of class discussing was Leviticus 19:9-10:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyards bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

She told us that while we might associate Leviticus with a litany of sexual prohibitions, this passage equates holiness with a capacity to share, and to attend to disadvantaged people. Her point was not to refute the prohibitions in Leviticus. Instead, she wanted to add a wider context by focusing on passages that informed a sense of living in just and equitable ways that would resonate with the group. She laid out printed copies of several news articles on immigration in the United States. Handing one to each of us, she said that when we read about something going on in the world, we should remember verses which called for care toward the sojourner as a lens for understanding and responding to happenings in our daily lives.

This approach of emphasizing love and compassion as the essential messages of the Bible came through in interviews when congregants talked to me about their faith. A Second Presbyterian member named Annabelle, a regular attendee of the “First Look Over Lunch” Bible study, shared that in her capacity as a church deacon, she has dispensed The Lord’s Supper, and experienced a deep love for those to whom she handed the bread and wine. She wanted to replicate the sense of blessing she felt in the worship service in her attitude toward queer congregants, predicated on love and acceptance.

I think we are born the way that we are born and that God wants us to be who we are. I believe we all have these innate talents or gifts that we have. And I think we all need to find what they are and bring them out... We have to be true to that. I'm not as well educated in 'Jesus Bible stuff.' But my God in what I've read from the Bible is accepting of all of us, and He wants all of us to be who we are. My God loves us all, makes us who we are for a reason. God puts us all out there to be different. How to embrace those differences is the key.

Annabelle shared that as a parent, she understood the responsibility of raising a child. She stressed that parents of queer children must also accept this responsibility, even if their child's sexual orientation or gender identity was unexpected to them. Identity, which Annabelle defined in terms of innate talents and gifts bestowed by God on the individual, must be encouraged to be expressed. Annabelle said that showing love and embracing difference was compatible with the will of God. She did not quote any specific chapter or verse. And she told me that she is not a biblical expert. But she asserted that from what she has read of the Bible, she can confidently associate loving traits with God.

When Sharon, an *Unclobber* group member, found that she could not change minds easily by suggesting different interpretations of clobber passages, she took a similar approach to Annabelle. She explained to me that her argument to non-affirming Christians moving forward would revolve around how her understanding of Jesus as inclusive influenced how she treated the people around her.

I have faith that God is there, and his son died on the cross. The kind of person that Jesus was as he was living among people, I look to those things as examples as a good way to live. I don't think God or Jesus would want me to be discriminatory or to be mean or to exclude someone.

Sharon was confident as she said this, a broad smile across her face. She told me after the interview that this argument was much easier for her than remembering detailed interpretations of “clobber passages.” Her view that God and Jesus would not approve of unkindness toward LGBTQ+ people formed the basis of her change in tactic. Daphne, a Nazareth member who attended Jordan’s Bible studies, espoused a comparable belief to me in an interview, saying, “LGBT people are people that God put on this earth, just like the rest of us. It doesn’t matter to me. I want them to come to church and think this is a loving congregation and they feel accepted here.” When I asked her to elaborate on the notion of being loving in relation to this topic, she continued that she would probably hold this view even if she was not a practicing Christian. But being a Christian, and knowing about the love of Jesus, made this view even more powerful. Like Annabelle, Daphne did not refer to a specific Bible passage, even when I asked in any came to mind. Daphne is one of Nazareth’s most dedicated volunteers, working in the church office weekly. She also helped to start a weekly women’s circle at the church which lasted two decades. She also knows her Bible well, and she can quote specific chapters and verses whenever she wants to. But here, she stressed that she wanted to keep her answer general because a “simple” explanation would suffice. Christians are commanded to love, she concluded, and though the Bible is complicated, she believed that it fundamentally stressed the centrality of that love.

3.4 Attending to Lay Theologies

Of the four strategies I have discussed in this chapter, the final method of keeping an uncomplicated and concise focus on love and acceptance as a way to understand LGBTQ+ people in relation to the words of the Bible, was by far the most common approach congregants described to me. In interviews, conversations, and the Bible studies, an overwhelming proportion of congregants took this approach when discussing how they had come to have accepting

stances. Though their stances were rooted in their understandings of the Bible, when they recalled particular passages, they did not feel the need to directly quote. Instead, they gave a brief summary of an idea or a particular narrative, keeping the notion of love at the center of the conversation.

When they provided summaries of accounts from the Bible that centralized love, examples primarily came from the gospels. They referenced Jesus' calls to love one another (John 13:34) and to love one's neighbors (Matthew 22:37-39). They also focused on instances in which Jesus includes or welcomes someone who might otherwise be marginalized, which congregants then connect to their own affirming stance. Some recalled the story of Jesus casting a demon out of the daughter of a Syrophenecian woman, after she convinces him to help her even though she is a Gentile and viewed as an outsider (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30). In Mark's gospel (7:27), Jesus initially rebuffs the woman, saying "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs," with "dogs" likely referring to the woman's outsider identity as a Gentile (Psalm 22:16, Revelation 22:15). When she responds that even dogs may eat of the children's crumbs, Jesus proclaims that because of her answer, her daughter is healed. Another story is Jesus' healing of a Roman centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10). Here the centurion does not share much in common with Jesus in terms of background or worldview, yet he says something which "amazed" Jesus, and the servant is healed of his deadly affliction (Luke 7:9). Both of these stories, congregants stress, show people outside Jesus' community and faith tradition who persuade and impress Him. Even though they are what Jared from St. Michael's called "Jesus' traditional others" in an interview, the blessings of Jesus still apply to them. Who are we as contemporary Christians, Jared continued, to deviate from Jesus' example, and exclude LGBTQ+ folks who desire membership in the community? To

make the connection to queer folks even more explicit, several congregants concluded their stories by noting, as Jordan did in the classes at Nazareth, that the recorded sayings of Jesus in the gospels contain no mention of same-sex love and attraction. Nor does Jesus call for discrimination against gender minorities, and point to His affirmation of eunuchs in Matthew 19 as an corollary.

A few of the stories which congregants drew upon came from elsewhere in the Bible. Ruth (1:16) saying to Naomi “Where you go, I will go...your people shall be my people, and your God my God” was compared to chosen family, a style of kinship many queer people embrace (Weston 1991, Lewin 1993). Paul’s entire project of preaching the gospel to “the uncircumcised,” proclaiming that “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,” was cited as a comparable shift in the Church to the one which affirming congregants were trying to bring about in their LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and actions (Galatians 2:7; 3:14). Given how comparable the project of welcoming traditionally marginalized LGBTQ+ people into the church was to Paul’s project, I was surprised not to find this portion of the scripture serving as a more prominent theological basis for inclusive actions, usually only mentioned in passing by clergy. More congregants beyond clergy, however, noted that we could add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of identifiers Paul gives in his declaration in Galatians 3:26-29 that,

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

By referencing passages they have learned through personal Bible reading or group study (even if not directly quoting), and often by adding knowledge they gained in a small group, congregants overwhelmingly kept their “theologies” on queer issues rooted within a firm and repeated biblical command to love and to welcome extravagantly.

As Yasmin Moll notes, “Anthropologists have not paid enough attention to theology” (2018:236). By this, Moll means that while religious subjects might seek to acquire what Robbins calls “elite religious knowledge that takes the form of theology...reflections on this or that religion, often generated by specialists who devote a good deal of time to its self-conscious production and who create and refine it,” anthropologists have not yet paid enough notice to these processes (2019:15). Both Moll and Robbins contend that such knowledge is far from irrelevant and inaccessible to practitioners of a particular religion, even if they are not the specialists credited for developing particular theological points or trends. In the Christian case, this knowledge is not only the purview of clergy, seminarians, and some lay leaders. Rather, it is something all the laity can also explore. Such knowledge is both relevant and (to a degree) accessible to all Christians as they develop their religiosity. Following Robbins argument in favor of the relevance of theological knowledge to anthropological studies of religion, my work in small groups suggests that we would be wrong to assume lay non-specialists within mainline Protestant churches “do not care” about theological knowledge (2019:15).

For the purposes of my research, congregants cared about this knowledge as it pertains to understandings of the Bible and LGBTQ+ people, in two major ways. First, they were invested in understanding biblical perspectives on queerness because they acknowledged anti-queer exegesis as a major hurdle to equal participation of queer people in religion life. As Moll argues, theology in this case is not perceived by congregants to reside in “an abstracted dogmatic

vacuum,” but as terrain on which congregants can situate themselves relative to their everyday lives (2018:236). By contesting anti-queer forms of exegesis, congregants were better situating themselves as queer or queer-affirming Christians, since they knew they espoused a position (or and identity) that they would have to vehemently defend against some of their fellow practitioners. Second, they cared enough to invest time, labor, and emotion into becoming better acquainted with theological knowledge, or discerning their own knowledge in small group settings. Anthropologists have long associated the production or modification of theological knowledge with authority, either the authority of one who develops the knowledge (the theologian) or one who teaches or relays the knowledge (the cleric, teacher, or leader) (Tomlinson 2020). Few of the laity I worked with were specialists beyond a religious studies class or two in college. Even the clergy sometimes began their own musings in a group by saying “Now, I’m no theologian.” Nor did most of the laity have advanced knowledge of doctrine that informed their particular denominations. Yet they explored and added theological points to their own worldviews with the understanding that while they might not have “authority,” they could help to the change the narrative about LGBTQ+ people and their relationship to Christianity.

The processes of theological knowledge production at the level of the local congregation are an extremely important aspect of understanding the role of theology in religious practitioners’ lives. It may be tempting to distill a general set of theological points for parishioners in a particular denomination by focusing on the core theology that denomination has historically embraced (i.e., we can understand Reformed parishioners in the PCUSA or UCC by looking at how denominational leaders have written and/or preached on John Calvin and the doctrine he influenced). As Dawne Moon argues, the doctrine of a particular denomination or theological tradition within Protestantism cannot be assumed to represent the individual beliefs

of congregants (2004:12). This is made clear in my own research context by portions of each congregation holding beliefs on LGBTQ+ issues that vary from the national policies of the Episcopal Church, PCUSA, or UCC, in terms of being less affirming. Moon (2004:13-14,18) coins the term “everyday theologies” to describe the production of understandings by people of faith which they make in the contexts of their church, fellow parishioners, and the Bible, but also their wider understandings of the world, right and wrong, and the nature of God. By engaging in group study or conversation on how to theologize on LGBTQ+ issues, laity work to construct and modify such everyday theologies. They use the theologies they construct to inform their positions on how much they are willing to change their institutions, and how they will engage in discussion over particular actions or church policies. The work congregants do in developing their theological stances should serve as an invitation to shift emphasis in the study of theological meaning-making from an exclusive focus on those who hold formal authority or training, to further consider not only how theology informs the lives of Christian laity, but how the participation of non-specialists in the production, reception, and propagation of theological knowledge affects the ability of churches to enact change relative to serving marginalized communities.

Chapter 4 “In This House We Believe...” Welcoming, Difference, and LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Mainline Institutions

4.1 Flags Along the Path

IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE

BLACK LIVES MATTER

WOMEN’S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

NO HUMAN BEING IS ILLEGAL

SCIENCE IS REAL

LOVE IS LOVE

KINDNESS IS EVERYTHING

Each line of text was a different bright color on a black background. The signs dotted the front yards and driveways of houses as I drove to St. Michaels, the harsh Michigan snows giving way to a warming afternoon sun. While there are many versions of the list of phrases included on the sign, the most prevalent—designed by Kristin Joiner in the wake of the 2016 presidential election and distributed by the group “Kindness is Everything”—joined the plethora of yard declarations I saw during my regular commutes to the church. They read “MELT ICE” (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) on top of a graphic of a dripping ice cube. “I Support that Woman from Michigan” (Governor Gretchen Whitmer). “KEEP AMERICA GREAT,” “No More Bullshit,” and “TRUMP 2020: MAKE LIBERALS CRY AGAIN.” On this particularly balmy Spring morning, I was driving past such signs on my way to St. Michael’s to meet with

about a dozen members of the congregation in the church's basement social hall. They group had formed spontaneously on a previous Sunday at one of the church's post-service coffee hours. They started an email chain, and finally met to brainstorm what message the church might contribute to respond to this cacophony of contrasting worldviews. Specifically, they wanted to brainstorm on how to cultivate a congregational environment that was more inclusive toward the LGBTQ+ community in their church and their wider municipality. While St. Michael's congregational rolls included several out queer members, the goal of the group was to build on the momentum generated by those members and give St. Michael's a reputation of a queer-inclusive faith community.

As I entered the social hall, going down a set of narrow stairs from the church's front door, the cold gave way to pleasant warmth. A local painting hobby group which included a few church members rented the hall several times a month. Some of their most recent watercolors hung on the walls, bright depictions of flowers, fish, and birds. Participants, both queer and non-queer members, took their places around a table. The group expressed hope that their frequent meetings would yield productive results, namely strategies for ministering to LGBTQ+ people who were already members of the church and for better advertising to potential newcomers and visitors. They wanted to convey that St. Michael's was the only "Open and Affirming" church to LGBTQ+ people in their small city, thereby setting themselves apart from other congregations nearby. As several of those congregations had larger memberships and budgets, this welcoming of queer folk would truly set St. Michael's apart. A few of the parishioners present were from the church's bishop's committee – the governing body of St. Michael's– giving an air of formality to the proceedings.

After spending around fifty minutes in the first meeting heatedly discussing what the group should be called, tempers had begun to be strained by the impasse. Though St. Michael's is known in its community for the variety of foods served in their post-service coffee hours, on this occasion we were limited to cinnamon rolls that were approaching staleness and cups of Diet Coke. The lack of a substantial meal as the afternoon became evening also heightening tension. The group finally decided on the name "Friends and Allies Group," but quickly dropped it after I remarked that the abbreviation "F.A.G." might send the wrong message if written on a button or banner. The group, which decided to tentatively call itself the "LGBT committee," proposed several ideas for events or initiatives, and it was eventually decided that the group would facilitate a safe space at the church for local LGBTQ youth. Spearheaded by a public schoolteacher in the group, it was decided the church could provide support to the youth by providing snacks, movies, and a welcoming hangout spot, in partnership with the local high school's GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance). This brainstorming would eventually lead to the founding of the "Open Hearts Club," which Mother Sophia mentioned in her sermon in Chapter 2.

Planning logistics for cultivating the Open Hearts Club as a "safe space" in that initial meeting, a few members began to worry aloud that the current sentiments of the congregation did not appear to be sincerely pro-LGBTQ+ enough to attract anyone new from outside. The church, they reasoned, did not yet have the kind of reputation for welcoming in the community that the group envisioned would be necessary. "We are putting the cart before the horse, here," Winny, a local middle school teacher and one of the group's most involved members, remarked. "How can we invite LGBT kids into this building if we can't guarantee they will feel welcomed?" A few other members took pause at her challenge, expressing that they were having the same uneasy feeling that the congregation had not expressed support for LGBTQ+ people genuinely

enough to maintain a space for youth that was truly “safe,” or at least nonthreatening. Winny continued that this uneasiness was only increased by the lack of visible advertising the church did. While so many signs and banners dotted the streets of the city, the only sign on the church’s front lawn displayed its name and service times. Nothing signaling LGBTQ+ inclusion.

“We need a rainbow flag, that will show we’re serious about what we say we believe” Helen, who is openly lesbian and attends with her wife, remarked. Her wife, Darlene, and several others nodded in agreement. Winny seemed to think this was a good idea as well. This would not be the first time rainbow colors had been used on church property either. Someone had painted rainbow bars on the church sign at one point, but those colors had long faded beyond recognition. A brand new flag, Helen reasoned, would replace the faded paint and would make the church’s affirming position known explicitly. Agreeing that a visible symbol prominently displayed on church property was the course of action they wanted, the conversation moved to logistics. The group pondered what kind of flag to get and where on the church grounds to place it, leading to both multiple conflicting ideas and even more queries. Should the church buy a large teardrop flag to place along the sidewalk, so drivers and pedestrians could clearly see it waving from down the street at nearby restaurants and boutiques? Should the doors to church’s education wing be flanked with pride flags, using the traditional six-color rainbow, a slight modification of the original eight-striped flag created in 1978 by artist Gilbert Baker of San Francisco, and a staple of pride celebrations (Baume 2020, Kates and Belk 2001, *MoMA* 2015)? Should there also be a transgender pride flag, with its five stripes of blue, pink, and white, to show the congregation’s familiarity on diversity within the LGBTQ+ community? Would this be a superficial or empty gesture? Would it be a conflict of interest to hang a flag with a “political” valence on a religious building, even though an American flag had been standing in the sanctuary

alongside the Episcopal flag as long as anyone could remember? Another participant, Jared, voiced his reservations to American flags adorning churches in the first place when this question came up. While he was in support of rainbow imagery in support of queer inclusion, his point turned the conversation towards reservations some group members had with the notion of a flag. Congregants had heard of vandalism of pro-LGBTQ+ signage and flags on churches before, with flags being burned, ripped, or stolen. Indeed, one of the rainbow banners Nazareth placed in their back churchyard was stolen and never returned shortly after being placed. Would this action make St. Michael's a target for homophobia and derision? Would it signal to the parents of closeted LGBTQ+ youth that their children were attending afterschool activities at a "gay church" and thereby "out" them?

The group meeting eventually moved on to other details related to the youth drop-in center, and the flag discussion was nearly forgotten for almost an entire year. Months later, as I passed colorful lights, inflatable reindeer, and signs advertising churches' Christmas Eve services, I returned to St. Michael's on a Sunday morning for an Advent service to find the following announcement printed in the bulletin. The announcement explained the placement of five small garden flags lining the path to the church's front door, which I had passed while walking up to the building:

Many people have noticed and are delighted by the garden flags that are adorning our walkway these days. But some are uncertain of each one's meaning. The Welcome flag speaks of the welcome that everyone is extended who come in our doors. The flag of the United States is a symbol of our American citizenship, even as we know our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. The rainbow flag is a sign that we are welcoming, affirming, and open to members of the LGBTI community and allies. The blue and black flag is sometimes called the 'thin blue line' flag, in remembrance of police officers who have died in the line of service. And the fifth

flag is the national flag of Haiti, whose Episcopal church and medical clinics Mother Sophia [the church's priest-in-charge] has volunteered in with Haiti's Outreach Mission. Have any ideas for other flags to show our connection to the wider community? See Mother Sophia!



Figure 5 Flag display, St. Michael's

Mother Sophia took some time during the announcements to explain on why the flags had so suddenly appeared. She had a habit during the announcements of walking from her usual spot behind the pulpit and standing in the main aisle of the sanctuary, parallel to the first row of pews, to give the announcements a more casual feel. Stemming from the LGBT committee's initial conversations earlier in the year that she also participated in, she wanted to include a rainbow flag amongst the others lining the path. She approached me during the coffee hour following the

service and further noted that as an additional gesture to the suggestion of flanking the entrance with various LGBTQ+-affirming flags, albeit a compromise from the original idea, she had affixed a translucent rainbow sticker to the window to the right of the education wing's front doors during the summer. Since the committee failed to reach a decision on what to do in their initial meetings, the vicar had ultimately taken action herself.

Mother Sophia's intent was to create a visible manifesto of the congregation's commitment to diversity for those passing by to see. In doing so, she made the de facto choice of which flags to purchase and include in the display. The announcement in the bulletin was meant to provide the opportunity for other members to suggest additions. Reactions from the congregation were mixed. Some lauded the flags as just the type of sincere commitment to inclusivity that was needed. But, conversely, others leveled critique at specific flags, and their placement together. Jared again expressed discomfort that flying an American flag could be read as politically reactionary, pushing away marginalized local residents to whom the church was meant to minister. Other congregants expressed confusion at the seasonal "Welcome" flag, which depicted a winter scene and prominently featured an owl, for being too decorative and secular. It did not express an explicit position on a particular issue, and absent of that, did not depict an appropriate seasonal Christian theme, such as the Nativity. The flag praising law enforcement – a "Back the Blue" or "Blue Lives Matter" flag – inspired the most ire. It seemed to reference conservatism and alignment with Trumpian populism and anti-BLM politics that the congregation simply did not possess. A flag referencing law enforcement also puzzled queer congregants, given the history of brutal crackdowns, widespread intimidation, harassment, and sometimes fatal violence which sexual and gender minorities have suffered at the hands of police, as John D'Emilio's work shows (1983). Some of the older queer congregants recalled

having directly experienced police harassment from the 1950s through the 1980s, in the same county where St. Michael's is located. Exclusively queer issues notwithstanding, the flag was especially puzzling given the prevalence of praise for Black Lives Matter (BLM) and other racial justice movements as righteous causes in Mother Sophia's sermons, since these movements explicitly call for critically examining the role of policing in the U.S.

Many congregants had generally ambivalent, confused, or dismissive attitudes to the juxtaposition of the flags, noting that the plethora seemed to espouse either deliberate arbitrariness or a divergent corpus of positions and worldviews. Such a jumble could be interpreted as just as insincere as no flags at all. Essentially, the flags were an attempt to gratify the diverse groups they represented but had ultimately made no one happy. "I see good intentions in it, but it just seems like a watered-down message so there wouldn't be pushback against a rainbow flag by people who didn't want one there in the first place" Meredith remarked to me as we shared a meal a few weeks after the flags were erected. "In theory, everyone should be happy because all the bases are covered, but no one is happy because *all* the bases are covered." Meredith argued that the possible messages were so muddled together that they seemed insincere, leading to the ambiguous reaction of most congregants. A signaled commitment to diversity, even if well-intentioned, was instead a topsy-turvy enigma.

4.2 What does it Mean to Welcome?

Just as Jesus called disciple Peter both "the rock" upon which the Church would be built, and at the same time rebuked Peter by commanding "Get behind me, Satan!," affirming mainline churches occupy a striking duality (Matthew 16:18; Mark 8:33). On one hand, mainline congregations which make a commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion have massive potential to occupy a cutting edge when it comes to repairing generations of harm done to marginalized

people, using their institutions to enact change to Christianity overall. On the other, well-meaning congregations often find they are unprepared to fully realize their aspirations of being welcoming and cultivate spaces defined by diversity. They find the road to a more inclusive future to be less clear than they might have imaged, beset by snags and problematic consequences, however unintended those consequences may be. In working to expand their welcoming, all three churches grappled with a central conundrum: how to cultivate a diverse and inclusive congregation and signal to the wider community that they were offering sites of acceptance for people who had experienced oppression. As the LGBT committee discussed in the St. Michael's social hall, wanting to be welcoming was one thing, but planning and implementing actionable steps towards a more inclusive congregation was quite another. If the congregation was going to sincerely signal the church's commitment to inclusivity to community members, potential visitors, other churches, and (most importantly) queer seekers who these changes were meant to most directly benefit, welcoming actions had to leave the realm of aspiration and manifest in everyday congregational practice.

While the history of prejudice against queer people in Christian spaces was deep and bitter, when asked, congregants felt they could fulfill a goal of inclusivity in "word and deed," having a clear language of welcoming and a series of concrete and feasible actions. Members saw themselves as doing their part in taking a more general stand against anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice at a local and national level. Local, in the sense that they were physically welcoming community members who had suffered discrimination into their own church and setting an example for other local faith groups. National in that they were changing the demographics of their overall denominations by facilitating greater numbers of actively participating LGBTQ+ congregants. While the three denominations the churches belong to are among the most

LGBTQ+-friendly of all mainliners in terms of the national policies I outlined in Chapter 1, affirming parishioners wanted to make sure their congregations reflected denominational progress. Queer and non-queer congregants demonstrated a conviction that anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination constituted a problem which they felt they could work to “fix” in their church by making space for new queer parishioners and by maintaining equitable spaces for the queer members already present. Members felt comfortable and even accomplished in articulating a clearly developed rationale pertaining to welcoming queer members and undertook actions of varying scales to promote equity for LGBTQ+ people and celebrate their presence in church. Inclusive actions and behaviors by congregants ranged from small interpersonal interactions, such as strategies for greeting new visitors, to programmatic alterations of the worship service and physical alternations of space like church advertising and signage. LGBTQ+ inclusion also manifested in church settings through special events and activities such as talks by guest speakers, workshops, and film viewings.

I set the scene for a discussion of how inclusive actions are made manifest in mainline settings, but also how those actions connect to the ways in which mainliners understand difference. This allows me to present the circumstances for why church members struggle in thinking about certain kinds of difference when working to shift the boundaries of who belongs in their congregations. Attempts to be more inclusive to queer members revealed a level of unpreparedness by congregants to respond to experiences and needs of queer folks with certain kinds of intersectional identities – in the sense of the term *intersectionality* which expresses the interconnectedness and inseparability of systems of oppression – particularly queer people who are non-white and non-cisgender. An understanding of LGBTQ+ identity that disproportionately channels mainline inclusion efforts toward white, affluent gays and lesbians primarily excludes

queer people of color who remain invisible in parishioners' conceptualization of queerness. Such invisibility continues when, in operationalizing plans to welcome marginalized people, congregants feel at a loss to talk about race or address issues of racism, and to reckon with the lack of racial diversity in their majority-white congregations and municipalities. Systems of racialized discrimination and aggression, particularly anti-Blackness, were problems congregants acknowledged and decried as repugnant and anti-Christian. But they paired this denouncement with a caveat that they did not know how to effectively combat racism, and whether they even had any power to combat oppression through antiracist practices in their congregations.

Meanwhile, conflating sexual orientation with gender identity in members' understandings of "queerness" resulted in most welcoming actions being geared towards gays and lesbians, and a perception that gays and lesbians serve as a metonym for the entire LGBTQ+ community. Such an approach flattens the multi-dimensionality of queer identity and queer history, and the myriad sexualities and gender identities therein. Understandings of how to equitably welcome Christians who were marginalized on the basis of gender identity and expression were not totally excluded from members' planning and deliberations around inclusion. But actions or discussions intended to address transgender experience or critique transphobia specifically were less frequent. These actions were generally limited to educating members on the basics of transgender identity, and not developing actionable ways to critique and oppose the disenfranchisement of and violence against transgender Christians. Despite this unequal focus, members in each congregation still expressed confidence in their ability to put concrete actions into practice that were meant to directly benefit all LGBTQ+ churchgoers.

Explaining mainline approaches to increasing diversity within their congregations and denominations, in terms of intent and impact, also depends on an understanding of how

congregants understood and discussed forms of oppression and discrimination against groups that comprised small minorities in mainline denominations – be they sexual, racial, or gender. The actions churches took (or did not take) to create welcoming spaces, and to convey a sincere or genuine repudiation of systems of oppression are key to grasping the ways in which congregants compartmentalized and isolated categories of identity in their approach to understanding difference. At the close of the chapter, I will explore how congregants began to develop more intersectional understandings of difference over time through work in social justice organizing. Members developed greater appreciation for intersectional coalition-building through participation in organizations national movements that were not exclusively focused on LGBTQ+ issues, and were not organizationally based in their own congregations or denominations. Such engagement had ramifications in the ways congregants thought about topics of identity and oppression, and how they aspired to demonstrate allyship.

4.3 New Hymns and Holy Kisses: Actionable Steps of Welcoming

Paul includes a common charge in his letters to Rome, Corinth, and Thessalonica. Along with embracing a lifestyle defined by love and peace, followers of Jesus should “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (2 Corinthians 13:12). While perhaps not as formalized as Paul’s *holy* kiss, a corresponding retinue of regular physical expressions pervades mainline churches across the country each Sunday morning, usually mid-way through the service. At the “Passing of the Peace,” the pastor will encourage congregants to “share the peace of Christ” with one another. Parishioners then stand and greet one another, shaking hands. When one parishioner says “Peace be with you,” the other will reply, “And also with you.” Expressions of greeting also included kisses, pats on the shoulders, and warm glances, but most often, they took the form of long and powerful hugs. In any given service, I could expect to receive at least a dozen hugs from other

congregants. They were also actively seeking to hug any newcomers as part of greeting them. “We might scare visitors with how much we hug,” Amber once told me in the sanctuary of Second Presbyterian, as she pulled me into a long embrace during the Passing of the Peace. Visitors often found themselves in an embrace on their first time attending church. If not subject to hugs, they at least found themselves in the center of a small circle of smiling congregants after worship had concluded, wishing them a good morning and inviting them back to a subsequent service. Mother Sophia once left a recessional line at St. Michael’s – the concluding portion of the service when the priest, worship assistant, and choir walked from the altar and down the sanctuary’s center aisle, carrying the church’s brass cross to the rear doors during the final hymn – to greet a new family who had sat in one of the rear pews shortly after the service started. Members acknowledged in a way that seemed almost guilt-ridden that this kind of behavior can be overbearing, even off-putting, but is an important way to express that the space is meant for visitors as much as lifelong members. At Nazareth, hugs and handshakes for new visitors came with gifts. The gifts consisted of a small bag of baked goods, prepared each week by members of the congregation, and a brochure for the church.

Processes such as methods of greeting became key as members focused on tangible actions to welcome LGBTQ+ seekers, as it provided a basis for them to ponder how to embody a series of qualities key to cultivating a welcoming institution. The lexicon of terms associated with these actions – *accepting, affirming, inclusive, hospitable, equitable* – became part of congregants’ regular vocabulary, signaling a range of sentiments and activities. These new considerations blended with strategies congregants had already learned about how to socially interact with a newcomer to church: making eye contact, smiling, answering questions, and

engaging in certain kinds of low-stakes conversation. Delia, a Nazareth member and faithful office volunteer, noted that the word “welcoming” meant the following to her.

Even though somebody is different from me, for whatever reason, it’s important for me to judge them based on what’s in their heart. And then I want to try and understand who they are a little bit. Not to say, “I don’t accept that, or I do,” but just to get to know them. Speaking to them when they walk through the door, reaching out to them. “Do you have questions?” “Can I help you find something?” “Will you sit with me?” “Glad you came!” I wish we did more to make our Open and Affirming-ness more. When somebody walks through the door who’s not a heterosexual person, I want them first of all to know that they’re welcome here, and that we promote the sense of feeling of welcoming. They’re people that God put on this earth just like the rest of us. I feel like we need to do more, I don’t know. When people do come, that they feel part of a group, and that there’s a place for them here, whether it’s a group or a gathering. That they’re embraced.

Like Delia, queer and non-queer members alike emphasized that beyond a sense of warmth and helpfulness being conveyed to visitors and new members, they needed to make internal shifts in the practices of congregational life and ministry. Such shifts were needed as an assurance that in their actions of welcoming, parishioners were holding space for LGBTQ+ people specifically. But beyond conceptualizing what a welcoming space looks like, parishioners needed to operationalize straightforward actionable steps toward queer-inclusive ministry in their individual congregations. “Some people here are doers. ‘What can we do? What can we do?’,” Delia remarked. This is an ongoing process of actions, she continued, sometimes through trial-and-error, or discerning how much time, effort, or education is needed by congregants to implement or change their behaviors. In some cases, shifts in congregational behaviors were done internally, while in other cases representatives from outside the congregation were brought in to facilitate dialogue or education. For example, St. Michael’s, provided education on correct

pronoun usage as it related to gender identity when it was identified as a priority for both the group running the Open Hearts Club and the group administering the monthly “Coffee and Conversation” speaker series. Members noted that they had heard other members misuse they/them/theirs pronouns, or use pronouns in a misgendering way, which they feared would be harmful or triggering to LGBTQ+ youth in the Open Hearts Club if such misuse of pronouns happened in their presence. Concerns over the need to shift the congregation into a greater awareness of the importance of pronouns lead to a session of “Coffee and Conversation” when the congregation invited the director of the University of Michigan’s Spectrum Center to give a training in how to use gender pronouns in ways that were more LGBTQ+-inclusive.

Actionable steps around welcoming LGBTQ+ people in mainline congregations take many forms, but for the purposes of summary, I will divide them into general categories. One of these categories which is the most straightforward consists of additions or modifications to the ritual and liturgical patterns of the Sunday morning service itself, facilitating encounters with the sacred in such a way as to give queer members equal access or increased opportunity for participation. Of the multiplicity of examples that illustrate this category of actions, three important sub-categories which were on full display across the three congregations are 1) adding gender-neutral language to the liturgy; 2) presenting statements of support for queer dignity and queer civil rights during the worship service; 3) providing opportunities for queer members to take part in leading or facilitating the service.

When it came to gender-neutral language, the traditional greeting given by the pastor to the congregation, “Brothers and Sisters in Christ” was modified. The modified greeting was either the gender-neutral “Siblings in Christ,” or more subtly, a reversal of genders to “Sisters

and Brothers in Christ.” In a few instances, God was also referred to in gender-neutral language. For example, Revelation 21:3-4 is translated in the NRSV as,

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Using a modified version which replaces he/him/his pronouns, pastors and worship leaders would instead read the passage this way:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples, and God Godself will be with them; God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Scripture was not the only place where gender-neutral language was utilized, with hymns being another key aspect of the service. Take the extremely popular 1861 hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty,” itself based on text from Revelation. The third verse of this hymn is traditionally found in mainliners’ hymnals as,

Holy, Holy, Holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see:
Only Thou art holy, there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power in love, and purity.

In a gender-neutral rewording, “Though the eye of sinful man” is modified to “Though the sinful human eye,” following a trend of replacing “mankind” with “humankind” in the liturgy. These modifications accompanied the inclusion of newer hymns into the worship service that more explicitly supported welcoming traditionally marginalized groups. Examples used include “Singing for Our Lives” (Holly Near 1979), “All Are Welcome” (Marty Haugen, 1994), and

“God Made Us from One Blood” (Thomas E. Troeger, 1988). For the one-year anniversary of the ONA covenant vote, the choir director at Nazareth prepared a special anthem: “My Love Colours Outside the Lines” (Gordon Light, 1995), with its third verse being especially poignant for the queer members of the choir and wider congregation:

My soul longs to colour outside the lines,
Turn wounds to blessings, water into wine,
I want to walk beyond the boundaries,
Where I’ve never been before,
Throw open doors to worlds outside the lines.

Statements of support and affirmation for queer dignity were most often part of sermons and prayers. In a typical service across all three churches, several prayer formats were present throughout the order of worship, ranging from those which the language was always the same every Sunday (The Lord’s Prayer) to those that changed from week to week. In the Episcopal Church, the language for prayers or *collects* – which are short prayers made about a specific subject – is taken directly from the *Book of Common Prayer*. In Reformed traditions like PCUSA and UCC, however, the main prayer of the service, called a “pastoral prayer” is more freeform. Content is largely at the pastor’s discretion, sometimes tying into themes from the sermon. It can be pre-written or prayed spontaneously. Across the mainline denominations, Sunday prayers also involve reading names off a “prayer list,” a list of names that was usually printed in the bulletin. It lists names of congregants or friends and family of congregants who were ill, grieving, or otherwise in need of prayer. Prayers of thanksgiving are also offered, but prayer lists are usually reserved for those experiencing hardship, loss, or sickness. In prayers in which the minister implored divine comfort for entire groups, or the alleviation of oppression, LGBTQ+ persons

were often named. LGBTQ+ people were included amongst lists of marginalized groups, with invocations to bring an end to systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. Or prayers might speak to a more specific component of the community, such as a prayer for gay youth suffering from bullying and violence at school, or same-sex couples who fear that their marriages will be invalidated by legislatures or courts. Individual queer members of the congregations were added to the prayer list when circumstances necessitated it, their names prayed aloud. Many queer congregants came from previous church experiences in which prayers were centered around calls to God to protect the faithful from LGBTQ+ people, from “sex-sex attraction” or “gender confusion.” Or they implored God to bring forth public servants who would resist the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights. Therefore, having queer folks mentioned in prayers in more affirming and dignified ways in mainline spaces was, for some, a momentous change in what they were used to.

Finally, queer members of all three churches had the opportunity to actively participate in the worship service. This included entering into official membership in the congregation, singing and praying in the pews with all the same privileges as any member. But opportunities for participation also included more active leadership roles in conducting the service. At St. Michael’s, Helen and Darlene frequently volunteered to carry the elements of the Eucharist, wafers and wine in silver containers, to the altar for their blessing and dispensation together as a married couple. While Mother Sophia served the wafers to parishioners kneeling at the communion rail, saying “Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven,” one partner followed her with the chalice, encouraging congregants to either sip directly from the cup or commune “by intinction” (dipping the wafer in the wine), saying “Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation.” At Second Presbyterian, an openly gay pastoral intern named Luke (who I will return to in more

detail in Chapter 5) also often served the elements alongside Pastor Camille. He also read the weekly scripture, lead prayers, sang in the choir, and even guest-preached on occasion. Other queer members read the weekly scripture aloud at the lectern, and helped with collecting the offering. Personal testimonies related to queer inclusion like those at Nazareth I discussed in Chapter 2 also took place in the two other congregations, albeit less frequently. Meredith gave several each year at St. Michael's.

Terrence, the gay member of Second Presbyterian who had been instrumental in the *Torn* reading group, discussed the effects these actions had on his experience in an interview.

Did I ever think each Sunday that I wasn't welcome? No. Did I see that everyone was shaking hands and embracing and all that? Absolutely. I could hear welcome from the pulpit. So I bought the farm in terms of thinking this place was all inclusive. And we used the [*Torn*] book club to engage in a conversation about the gay community.

Terrence's use of the "gay community" is important, even though modifications to Second Presbyterian's worship service or programming were not framed as being specifically geared towards gays and lesbians. The actions still tended to skew towards welcoming based on sexual orientation. The way in which Terrence framed discussions over LGBTQ+ issues as discussing gay issues in particular was mirrored in planning inclusive actions by church leadership and small groups more broadly. Much of this energy was put toward welcoming same-sex couples and their families and getting members of the congregation more comfortable with same-sex marriage. As happened in the debate leading up to Nazareth's ONA vote, queries and challenges from congregants were often framed around same-sex marriage, and its place in the Church. This increased focus on married gays and lesbians manifested itself in the ways the resulting actions of welcoming took place. For example, prayer content that was meant to reference LGBTQ+

issues often skewed towards sexual orientation, with statements like “...no matter who they love” or “...no matter who they marry,” referencing those in need of prayer. At St. Michael’s, members of same sex couples would be asked to assist with the service in ways that would pair them together and stress their couplehood, such as passing metal plates to collect and offering, or serving as greeters and dispensing bulletins on either side of the church’s doors.

Terrence mentions preaching among the inclusive actions he witnessed, but I suggest his mention of embraces and handshakes and the church reading group belongs in a different category of welcoming actions. This category involves existing official and informal practices that were not part of the Sunday morning service or the liturgical calendar but were still regularly occurring or recognized as significant or special. Congregants repeated these practices the same as they always had done but understood their actions to be as equally beneficial for queer people as non-queer people. Practices included patterns of interaction between people in church space which were already commonplace but lacked any formal repetition. This includes practices I have already mentioned of warmly greeting and/or hugging new visitors, presenting them with a small gift, and inviting them to future services and events. This category of actions also included continuations of church events which happened throughout the week but were not designated as “worship.” “Book clubs,” including the *Unclobber* reading group at St. Michaels and the *Torn* reading group at Second Presbyterian, discussed issues of queerness outside the Sunday morning service on a weekly basis. As another example, there were monthly lecture series on pressing topics which both St. Michael’s (the “Coffee and Conversation” speaker series) and Second Presbyterian (which had a similar format but was called “Courageous Conversations”) had as part of their monthly programming. Both churches prioritized getting speakers periodically to hold lectures and facilitate discussions of LGBTQ+ issues as part of the lecture series’

programming. Perhaps most indicative action of this category is the most ubiquitous: displaying the phrase “ALL ARE WELCOME” on church signage, bulletins, or in prayers and sermons. In sermons, correspondence to the congregation, and public announcements, church leadership repeated the call to welcome *all* as an assured promise to new and existing congregants with an acknowledgment that such a guarantee implicitly applied to queer folks as fully and equally as their non-queer counterparts.

Another category of actions worthy of note, such as the founding of the Open Hearts Club, were entirely novel welcoming actions or projects that did not augment or re-tool an existing process in church life. Congregants found that these actions were the most difficult to sustain long-term. This is because they were not building on projects in which congregants had previously invested labor. As the St. Michael’s members who formed the core administrators of the Open Hearts Club told me, they were building such an enterprise “from the ground up.” This involved them focusing on logistical minutiae of a new program one and even two years after beginning the drop-in center. The other tasks they did around the church, they explained, had been present for much longer in the congregation’s history and required less-constant attention. While the space in which the club met, the social hall of St. Michael’s, was a familiar choice for most church-based events that had more than a dozen or so participants – and therefore could not comfortably fit in the library – all other aspects needed to be carefully deliberated. How many adults needed to be present in the room at any given time, to meet TEC’s ethical and legal standards for care of minors on church grounds? What are the protocols for any medical emergencies? Should the group try to have conversations about navigating queerness in their municipality or focus on the more enjoyable pursuits of playing board games, decorating pumpkins, and baking cookies? Do teenagers even like board games? Members found an initial

lack of consensus around these questions, but each question needed to be answered to sustain the club in a way that met the needs of participants while also giving peace of mind to parents of the involved youth and congregational leadership.

These novel actions also included alterations to the exterior of the buildings to mark them as queer-friendly spaces. Mother Sophia's display of flags along the path to St. Michael's did not remain in place for long after they were first debuted; a particularly windy winter storm took several of them a few weeks later. When the poor weather ceased, a lesbian couple who helped to run the Open Hearts Club provided and installed a larger rainbow flag to hang on the door to the church's office and education wing, flanked by two smaller wind-catching tube flags, also rainbow. These flags were intended to greet visitors and parishioners that June for Pride Month, as the Open Hearts Club was planning several summer events for the city's LGBTQ+ youth. As the committee feared in their initial meeting, the large rainbow flag was stolen by persons unknown before those events took place. This damaged the church's siding when the hooks securing the flag were also torn out. While small rainbow tube flags were hung during pride month in subsequent years, there is no more permanent large flag. The only permanent making was the transparent rainbow sticker Mother Sophia put of the glass of the door from the inside, so it could not be peeled off and taken from outside the building.

Nazareth also had its share of vandalism and theft when it came to exterior LGBTQ+-friendly signage. A chain-link fence surrounds the churchyard, onto which the ONA task force secured a rainbow banner shortly after the vote, inscribed with the words "Jesus Didn't Reject People. Neither Do We." This banner was stolen six months after it was placed. Since the committee wanted rainbow imagery to be prominently displayed as the Christmas season

approached, and higher numbers of visitors were anticipated, they placed a hastily crafted sign they printed in the church office and covered in clear tape to protect from rain and snow.

To whomever stole our banner. Jesus still loves you and so do we, but we would like our banner back. So can you return it, no questions asked? Thanks. p.s. Santa Claus is watching :)

The banner was never returned. Since then, Nazareth has opted for a solution similar to St. Michael's, choosing a smaller permanent installation in the form of a brass plaque on the fieldstone façade of the church with its Covenant of Welcome above a small *ichthys* – an ancient Christian symbol of a fish made from two connected arcs – with rainbow stripes. They have opted to use a larger display on a more temporary basis, which consists of a set of six wooden doors, each painted in a different color of the rainbow, printed with the words “GOD’S DOORS ARE OPEN TO ALL.” The set of doors is only assembled and displayed during Pride Month. It is weighed down with heavy iron bars to prevent vandals from pushing it over.

4.4 Which Queer Bodies?

“We don’t care if you’re white or black, gay or straight, we don’t care if you’re a man or a woman, if you’re disabled,” Jacob told me as we sat in the St. Michael’s library. Jacob was tall and spindly, with thin glasses, and he would often double over in contagious laughter at his own jokes. He noted how easy it had been for him to get involved in church activities, ranging from being a choir member to “grill master extraordinaire” at the annual chicken barbeque. He praised the enthusiastic attitude his fellow parishioners had toward welcome. “I don’t want to sound like an advertisement, but I think we’re a warm church, a welcoming church, we even tend to overdo it. We go out of our way to say, ‘come on down, come on in’.” In spite of that, however, he described the small city in which we sat by saying, “a bag of Carolina rice is probably more

integrated,” suddenly becoming somber. We were talking about how efforts of the congregation to welcome LGBTQ+ people had changed over the years, and Jacob noted that the church had seen a dramatic increase in queer members over the past decade. With a brimming smile, he said the was ecstatic about the change, but he did not feel it had been the result of the kind of organized plan St. Michael’s members had been trying to develop in their social hall meetings.

I don’t think we ever said, ‘ok let’s go out and try and attract gay people.’ But when you talk about who are on the outside of society, who would benefit from St. Michael’s, that came up. I don’t know how gay people got here, except perhaps word of mouth. There was never any overt anti-gay feeling that went away, [welcoming] was something that appeared, and nobody had any objection to it. In fact, this is a good thing. We are a point of refuge or solace to people whose options are limited. I’m sure there are people who are church literate in this town who would describe us as ‘the gay church.

Jacob explained that he did not mean “gay church” in a derogatory way but felt that among religious groups in the United States, mainline Protestants like him are among the most likely to hold the view that queer Christians just as worthy of sitting in the pews and saying the prayers as anyone else. Traditionally in Christian settings, including mainline institutions in the not-too-distant past, queer people have not always been welcomed to inhabit the space of the church in the same way as non-queer people. This was a trend congregants like Jacob who described themselves as “affirming” or “allies” acknowledged and hoped to change. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Judith Butler argues that to form a “subject” a domain of “abject beings” must also be produced:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is

required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain... In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject... (1993:3)

In the context of Butler's argument, the project of LGBTQ+ inclusion is far more than logistical planning around a set of actions and behaviors. The challenge is the bodies of those whose exclusion so long been used to define parameters of the normative Christian subject (e.g., "we are Christians because we are not queer") coming out of the "unlivable" zone. This is not only a conceptual reorganization of bodies, but also a process of queer bodies physically entering the space of a church, the zone where they hitherto were denied access. But just because a person is allowed into a space in which they had been considered an outsider, what Andrew Shryock (2008:410) calls "a zone of trespass" in the context of hospitality, it does not mean they will feel welcomed or at ease. As Shryock notes, hospitable spaces are still spaces of obligation, even if someone is welcomed into them. The implicit feeling of remaining unwelcome in such a space is explored by Nirmal Puwar (2004) in the context of *dissonant bodies* or *bodies out of place*. Such bodies defy expectations or preconceptions when present in a particular space, causing what Puwar describes as a sense or feeling of abnormality, and moments of being noticed by the others in the room. These others, who "belong" in the space already, seem to ask, "What are you doing here?" without saying a word (2004:43). Such reactions can occur, Puwar grants, along the lines of gender, but are most acute regarding race (2004:43, Ahmed 2007). While applying this frame to queerness in the context of Christian churches is not an exact fit (after all, we are not just dealing with bodies here, but souls and spirits also), the feelings of abnormality Puwar describes are often felt by queer congregants. Because there is such a long history of LGBTQ+ people being outside the church, not being welcomed to participate, the goal of affirming

parishioners must not only be to usher queer bodies into the space of the church – or “get more butts in the seats” as one congregant jokingly remarked – but to give the impression that queer presence in the church is not inherently dissonant. Avoiding a sense of dissonance involves avoiding LGBTQ+ visitors and members becoming points of spectacle or undue scrutiny for other congregants. To prevent double-takes or sour glares when a same-sex couple holds hands during a prayer or kiss one another during the passing of the peace, or when someone expressing their gender in a way that is unfamiliar to most congregants approaches the communion rail to receive the bread and wine.

But while mainliners are working diligently to prevent queer folks from feeling a sense of being out of place, other marginalized folks continue to feel dissonance like what Puwar describes in mainline Protestant settings. Jacob himself noted this when he described the welcoming actions of St. Michael’s as warm towards gay people, but still lamented the church was not an “integrated” space. In practice, members of the LGBTQ+ community who eventually find their way to mainline pews, including those of the three churches, often bear a striking resemblance to the majority current members apart from their sexual orientation: they are white, cisgender, able-bodied, and often well-to-do. I will focus here primarily on the predominance of white cisgender gays and lesbians in the congregations. This prevalence coincides with Lisa Duggan’s (2003) and Jasbir Puar’s (2007; 2013) respective analyses of *homonormativity*, in which queer people who are most able to conform or are most willing assimilate to the structures of institutions which have traditionally privileged heteronormativity are the most likely to be warmly received. In discerning the kinds of actions that comprised inclusion, as noted above in the ways congregants understood terms like “welcoming” in terms of their own experiences in their church, the resulting behaviors that congregants adopted tended towards behaviors that

would hypothetically make them feel welcome, were they the visitor or seeker. What would they want “if the shoe were on the other foot,” and they were coming to church for the first time? But they acted on a premise that can be found in my interview with Jacob, in which he conflates and disregards potential differences among those seeking a church home: “We don’t care if you’re white or black, gay or straight, we don’t care if you’re a man or a woman, if you’re disabled.”

In their rush to declare difference moot in terms of eligibility for membership and downplay its social significance, the congregations potentially overlooked or elided queer folks who had experienced some of the most hostility and marginalization by majority-white Christian groups: queer people of color and those who are not cisgender. As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson write of the disruption of hegemonic discourses by scholars of queer studies, “the deconstruction of binaries and the explicit ‘unmarking’ of difference (e.g., gender, race, class, region, able-bodienss, etc.) have serious implication for those for whom these other differences ‘matter.’” (2005:5). By hastily unmarking the bodies of those they intended to welcome, the kind of body church members felt most equipped and prepared to successfully bring into their pews and coffee hours mirrored the white and cisgender bodies of existing members. These were, consequently, the queer bodies which would cause the least amount of dissonance of the kind Puwar describes, precisely because they so closely resembled existing bodies in the congregations. A lack of attention to difference, and instead a truncation of perceiving white cisgender gay and lesbian bodies to be representative of queer bodies writ large, deprived congregants of the opportunity to acknowledge meaningful difference within the queer “community.”

Numerous scholars have presented critiques of “community” as a concept, including Gerald Creed (2006) and Miranda Joseph (2002). Creed notes that “community” is often

idealized as homogenous and harmonious, and defined by shared identity and knowledge (2006:5). Joseph argues about the danger of implying “a utopian state of human relatedness” from community (2002:3). In her critique of the commonplace, uncritical use of the term, Joseph describes in the context of a gay and lesbian theater group in San Francisco the implicit prioritizations and exclusions that come from the invocation of “community.” In Joseph’s case, members of the theater group invoking the “gay community” in terms of who was meant to benefit from and participate in their venture was limiting. It excluded people of color and transgender people because of the focus on sexuality as an isolated or primary identity (2002:xvii). While Joseph notes that members of the group would never argue for exclusions on the basis of race or gender identity explicitly, it was certainly implicit. With a similar impact to what Joseph (2002:xviii) calls the “implicitly exclusionary deployments of community,” an unmarking of difference in mainline congregations hinders work to welcome those who possess the most “dissonant bodies” in mainline settings. This occurs in spite of congregational calls to welcome “all.” As David K Seitz’ work in a majority-queer Protestant congregation in Toronto shows, “the promise of congregational citizenship, of ‘a house of prayer for all people,’ has a highly uneven geography...a geography that breaks down in many ways, especially along the lines of race” (2017:55). Seitz describes people of color within the congregation experiencing racialized alienation, burnout, and feelings of being the focus of scrutiny, leading to most eventually leaving (2017:55-56).

A focus on welcoming “all” without reckoning with systems of racism and transphobia results in many mainline congregations struggling to understand queer experience beyond that of white gays and lesbians. Their efforts for more equitable or intersectional acts of welcoming are destabilized, hindering the project of a LGBTQ+-inclusive space because the space remains

uncomfortable for certain queer folks. Several affirming parishioners expressed anxiety that much of their fellow congregants did not recognize – or were not offered the kind of education that would prompt them to recognize – the many identities queer people can possess simultaneously. This awareness could affect the way congregants invite others into the church, and how they treat new members once they are present. Better opportunities to become aware of the internal diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, they reasoned, could empower and unite members in working to better eliminate queerphobia. For Johnson and Henderson, acknowledging these multiple identities is critical to successfully combatting oppression:

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on ‘single-variable’ politics...to ignore the multiple subjectivities of the minoritarian subject... is not only theoretically and politically naïve, but also potentially dangerous (2005:5).

The danger in this case is that queer members who are seeking church homes might still feel effects of prejudice and discrimination, because certain ways they are marginalized have not been addressed by a particular institution. A church would not reach its potential in welcoming as many queer people as possible, because the forms of oppression these intended new members can potentially experience have not been adequately addressed.

This tendency to not frame the queer body in terms of the multiple subjectivities a marginalized person can hold, as Johnson and Henderson do, is often done without intended malice in mainline settings. Nonetheless, it still reduces a queer person to the single variable of sexual orientation. Using the concept of *intersectionality* is a useful way to explore why mainliners were feeling anxiety around welcoming, and why they had problems creating the kind of “diverse” space many of them aspired to. I mobilize Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) definition

of intersectionality from “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” focusing on two of Crenshaw’s arguments. First, the avoidance of what Crenshaw calls a “single-axis framework” for conceptualizing discrimination, similar to Johnson and Henderson’s “single-variable politics” (2005:5). An intersectional experience is greater than the sum of its parts. An experience of racism, sexism, and queerphobia combined will be different than a racist, sexist, or homophobic act in isolation. In the case of these congregations, the urge to respond to occurrences of homophobia was made more difficult because of a naivete or lack of awareness of how the experiences gay and lesbian people might be different if they are women or people of color. In her analysis of Black women’s experiences in the American legal system, and specifically a refusal by courts to consider Black women as Black women (rather than as Black or as women in isolation), Crenshaw (1989:140) writes,

With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis. I want to suggest further that this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex-or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women.

Second, a failure to consider intersectionality undercuts both the capacity to interpret accounts of marginalized folks, and to mount effective critiques of particular systems of oppression, because such a framework only focuses on certain subsets of a population, usually ones with a certain amount of privilege relative to the rest of the group. Crenshaw (1989:140) continues,

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.

This is not to say that homophobia, transphobia, and racism are the same issue. The point of Crenshaw's framing is that they are distinct issues, such that one of them cannot be disrupted or remedied through an exclusive focus on one of the others.

Mainline congregations seeking to combat homophobia but feeling discomfort with critically considering implicit and explicit issues of racism is in keeping with a lack of reckoning that stretches back through the history of Christianity in the United States. As J. Kameron Carter (2008) argues in *Race: A Theological Account*, Christian theological discourse "aided and abetted the processes by which 'man' came to be viewed as a modern racial being," and that "modernity's racial imagination" has its teleology in Christianity. White Christians are heirs of a religious tradition which played a major role in creating contemporary understandings of race in the United States, as shown in Willie James Jennings' (2010) and Rebecca Anne Goetz' (2012) respective scholarship. Further, as Jemar Tisby argues, such histories make current Christian institutions complicit in systems of racism and racial discriminations in the United States, even if individual white church members do not think of themselves as racists. Not only, Tisby writes, do American churches have a record of supporting racism, but white Protestants are particularly culpable, having "a central, sometimes repressive, place in the story of race in America" (2019:16).

Unsurprisingly, members frame their shortcoming in acknowledging this legacy of racism and their own part in it as a Christian problem with Christian implications. “We’re just so fucking white,” a St. Michael’s member named Donna exclaimed as we shared an afternoon snack at her kitchen table. By “we,” she referred to her congregation, her neighbors, her hometown, and the overall Episcopal Church. As she put another chocolate chip cookie on my plate, she said she knew that there was not currently any sort of de jure racial segregation in her church. “There’s no one turning people away at the door, but that doesn’t mean people of color would feel comfortable there.” She continued that while her church had made great progress on welcoming gay and lesbian Christians, individual congregants and leadership alike wanted to focus exclusively on sexual orientation and not talk about race when strategizing acts of welcoming. Because they had taken steps to curb homophobic beliefs, it must mean that they were also opposing racist ones. She noted that this approach would not produce any progress, saying, “Truth and reconciliation regarding race isn’t something we can just leave up to God, because She’s not interfering.” She walked into her living room, grabbed her Bible, and leafed through it, saying she wanted to read the verses verbatim. She read Isaiah 58:6, and sections of verses 9 and 10:

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...If you remove the yoke from among you...then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

Being true to that charge, for her, meant that congregants needed to invest as much energy into educating themselves about other forms of oppression as they had regarding prejudice against gays and lesbians. “Racism is the biggest problem, in my opinion,” she clarified, noting the connections between the whiteness of her congregation and systems of racism in the United

States ran deep. Placing yet another cookie in front of me, she paraphrased a quote from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in an April 1960 “Meet The Press” interview.

I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian Church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. But this is something that the Church will have to do itself. I don’t think church integration will come through legal processes (Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project).

Other members of each of the three churches often shared similar perspectives as Donna’s when she referenced the words of Dr. King on racial segregation in churches. Their sentiment almost six decades later was that their churches, and mainline churches in general, were similar to St. Michael’s new queer members in their demographics: White, cisgender, middle-class, and even middle-aged in ways that mirrored the median age of mainliners. The racial demographics of the three churches closely matched the communities in which the churches were located. In the 2010 census, St. Michael’s wider municipality was 92 percent white and Second Presbyterian’s municipality was 97 percent white. Nazareth’s municipality was 75 percent white in 2010, but Nazareth itself resembled the other two churches by being about 90 percent white in its membership. These are also not churches where racial inclusion and integration could be prompted by significant transition in racial demographics of residents in their wider municipalities (e.g., Becker 1998), as the churches where I worked are not in places where people of color are moving in large numbers. Congregants acknowledged these demographic trends presented barriers, lamenting that few mainline congregations they knew of had the kind of racial integration they wished to see in their own church. This was partially because the

neighborhoods themselves were so white in their composition. “This is not just an ‘us’ [St. Michael’s] problem,” Donna told me, hanging her head.

The congregational and wider community demographics – especially as it related to their overwhelming whiteness – was something a majority of members pointed out, some fervently. They tended to frame it as a negative aspect of their church which they would seek to change. Jared noted of St. Michael’s,

This church’s official position, officially we are an open and accepting congregation. I think we live that out. I think we’re not perfect. With racial diversity, we might desire to have more people of color come to our church. There’s only so much you can do. Most African Americans in this country who are Christian are already churched, so we would basically be sheep-stealing. We can’t just go out and say we need more of a certain kind of people. We wouldn’t say “Hey gay men, we need more gay men in our church!” So many of us are clear about racism, and the treatment of minorities, and not being antisemitic. And then we fall short sometimes.

Jared and his entire family were passionate about cultivating an LGBTQ+-welcoming space at St. Michael’s, and noted that they felt the intent to be a “diverse” and “open” space was present in their congregations at large, even beyond their most ideologically progressive pew-mates. But at the same time, they lamented that the makeup of the congregation on any given Sunday morning was not reflective of the nation regarding race. Even though the church had gay and lesbian members, the congregation was still “fall[ing] short.” Their congregations were not just majority-white, they were almost entirely white in their makeup, with only a few members of color in each congregation. White congregants expressed their worry to me that both their institutions and the municipalities in which they were located were not just unwelcoming and lacking integration, but physically and emotionally unsafe for parishioners of color, particularly

Black parishioners. Just because parishioners were not happy with their congregation being overwhelmingly white, many like Jared reasoned they must avoid luring people of color from other churches into their potentially inadequate congregational setting. To do so could lead to the kinds of alienation Seitz describes, as well as tokenization. Or white members might try to engage in what Seitz calls “a ‘Goldilocks’ representational schema for the management of racialized and gendered bodies” in church life, with members policing what constitutes “not enough,” “too much,” and “just right” in terms of diversity (2017:42). This type of policing was already happening on some level in regard to welcoming sexual minorities, with fears among some congregants that inclusive actions would lead to their congregations becoming “gay churches” (i.e., having “too much” diversity).

With these anxieties being shared in public fora, combatting racism and confronting reasons behind the lack of racial diversity in their churches was clearly on the minds of white congregants. But beyond individual congregants mentioning their disapproval of the current demographics, congregation-wide actions rarely followed expression of these anxieties. Instead, white church members largely discussed race with far less of a goal of taking actionable steps to rectify oppression than they had when discussing queerness. They seemed at a loss for how to act in ways that rectified discriminatory practices, or improved the experiences of the very small number of people of color in the congregations. For example, the St. Michael’s *Unclobber* reading group decided to keep meeting weekly after they finished Martin’s book. For their second book, they elected to read and discuss Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. To take advantage of the mild Spring, we moved from the church library to an outdoor coffee shop down the block, watching bicycles and joggers go by as we discussed Alexander’s book. While, like Martin’s book, members agreed that the

topic was pressing and something they needed to be aware of, the tone of the group markedly changed when it came to implementing what we learned. Members said they were “frustrated,” “defeated,” and “felt powerless” when reading about institutional racism in the United States. They agreed that the disenfranchisement, abuse, and violence Alexander discusses is heinous, and should stop, but did not know how to translate those convictions into their practices.

In their discussions, members of the reading group (all white cisgender women) eschewed an individualist view of racism often held by White Americans, described by Frances B. Henderson and Bertin M. Louis Jr. as a belief that racism occurs as intentional racist acts between two people, such as the use of an epithet or an incident of violence (2017:57). Conversely, reading group members repeatedly noted that they understood that racism was systemic and institutional, rooted in a long history of white supremacy. But they expressed uncertainty at where or how to begin in resisting such systems, even in their own congregation. In our second meeting, Luann noted from her days of teaching that she knew it with difficult getting people to recognize injustice when it involved confronting one’s own privilege and implicit bias. “I have to keep confronting my own self with information,” she said to the group. “But bias can reach into areas where we don’t feel like we can easily intervene, like the justice system.” Sharon shook her head in agreement, saying, “it’s easy to be hands off like Pontius Pilate and let injustice keep happening, even if we hate it. I don’t know how to enter that system any which way.” Here, she is referring to the Roman governor who “washes his hands” of Jesus in the gospels, allowing him to be crucified but claiming no responsibility for his execution. Luann sighed, “What is the next thing our culture will create to hold people back? I’d like to think we could progress beyond that.” Meredith agreed, asking “can we see a way out of this? This kind of discrimination is about power, and power is such an aphrodisiac.”

A new group member, Lucy, asked if we thought Alexander would put a “what can you do” section at the end of the book. “I know we are doing something just by reading the book, but there has to be more.” Sharon noted that she had tried to make a list of things that she could do. She admitted that she had not added much to the list, but was considering writing letters to her local police chiefs and county sheriff and prosecutor about how they are addressing brutality against people of color by law enforcement. Luann smiled, saying she was grateful that “my eyes were way wide open when I was reading the book,” and agreed that she should make a list too, like Sharon did. But then her face became crestfallen, and she looked down at her coffee.

I wonder if it will make a difference? If you lined up 100 cops and asked them if it was ok to treat a person brutally they’d say no, not many would agree with it, but it keeps happening. More needs to be understood and done. I need to continue to educate myself, and I’m upset that we are not being taught about White privilege at a young age. It’s like health class, age-appropriate curricula could be developed. We’d think more critically.

In this short conversation, the reading group discussed a few actionable steps for responding to Alexander’s book and resisting systems of racism, including pressuring local leaders, working to confront implicit bias, and modifying educational practices. Group members also affirmed that they would make a point to intervene if they were a bystander to events of racism, and they wanted to pursue training in doing so effectively. But these steps were not related to St. Michael’s and seemed to evade one of the purposes for which the group had continued to meet: to gather as people of faith and use their experience with faith to discuss vital issues in the hopes of making their church a more welcoming place. This approach was vastly different from the ways in which the group had discussed *Unclobber*, when they used points made in the book to brainstorm actions they could undertake to make the church safer and more accepting of

LGBTQ+ people. Further, in addition evading the implications the topics discussed in Alexander's book had on St. Michaels, there was minimal discussion of the connections between *The New Jim Crow* and *Unclobber*, talking about the ways in which queerphobic discrimination might be more intense for queer people of color who were also experiencing racism. An approach that deemphasized the intersectionality of these identity categories had ramifications on their actions towards making the congregation LGBTQ+-inclusive, given that most queer congregants who were welcomed and affirmed had racial identities that largely matched the majority of mainliners.

4.5 Eliding the Broad Spectrum of Queerness

When it came to members' understandings of what it meant to be LGBTQ+, even among many gay and lesbian congregants, gender identity and gender expression were often conflated with sexuality. This is in keeping with how Susan Stryker (2008:147-148) describes homonormativity in terms of misconstruing and overlooking transgender identify, equating it to a sexual orientation category (2008:147-148). In the context of the churches, transgender, gender-fluid, and nonbinary experiences were largely overlooked as well. Parishioners considered these identities indistinguishable from a flattened, singular understanding of "LGBTQ+ experience" based on specific types of sexuality. Stryker argues that such homonormativity circumscribes the potential transgender people have to disturb and disrupt the dominant and the normative (2008:155). In mainline denominations where that trans, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming people have far less access to leadership and administrative roles, and education on gender identity and expression is severely limited among clergy and laity alike, the disruption Stryker describes is sorely needed. Instead, because they are the predominant members of the LGBTQ+ people in the congregations, the experiences of cisgender white gays and lesbians are

hailed and viewed as typical of queer subjectivity. They become what Puar – in a 2010 critique of the privileging of the accounts of white gay male liberals submitted to the “It Gets Better” Project – calls “an exceptional class of aspirational gay citizens.” Such citizens are highlighted at the expense of all others who might call themselves “queer” and are overlooked or perceived as less exceptional.

An example of prioritizing a particular kind of “exceptional” queer experience in mainline churches is the placing of strong emphasis on same-sex marriages between two cisgender gays or lesbians. This is certainly not to argue that gay and lesbian congregants who want to have their weddings or commitment ceremonies in mainline churches do not struggle for recognition from their fellow congregants, and in some cases their denominations. Indeed, these struggles have been an important aspect of LGBTQ+ people gaining equal participation in mainline spaces. In the pursuit of LGBTQ+ equality in the United States, George Chauncey speaks to this importance, writing, “the freedom to marry, including the right to choose one’s partner in marriage, has come to be regarded as a fundamental civil right and a powerful symbol of full equality and citizenship” (2004:165). Many same-sex couples seek marriage both for these broader notions of equality and advancing from “second-class citizenship” with civil and legal benefits of marriage in the United States: hospital visitation, joint-taxes, spousal sponsorship for citizenship, joint parent adoptions, and inheritance and pension eligibility, and many other benefits (Chauncey 2004:139, Andersen 2006, Klarman 2013, Wolfson 2004). It is no surprise that marriage has become a dominant goal of organizations and various social, political, and religious initiatives related to LGBTQ+ rights, including mainline coalitions like ONA, MLP, and Integrity. While originally focused on the membership of LGBTQ+ people in congregations, a great deal of emphasis shifted among the mainline denominations to debating

same-sex marriage, a trend that has increasingly trickled down into mainline congregations as well. Prior to Nazareth's ONA vote, the most frequent questions asked of Pastor Kenneth by congregants was "would you marry gay people?" When I asked congregants in interviews how they knew their church was affirming towards LGBTQ+ people, I often received responses like, to quote one congregant, "Well, we have same-sex weddings. That's a big deal." Each of these examples places a centrality on married gay and lesbian couples as key to (and indicative of) the integration of congregations' LGBTQ+ members into the wider group of parishioners.

Marriage, however, is the unchallenged absolute goal of all queer people. It certainly is not an aspiration of many of the queer Christians I worked with. Queer congregants who were not in long term relationships noted saw too much fixation on marriage as repudiating them as "unexceptional" because they did not include the desire to be married. In the context of the sex hierarchy Gayle Rubin outlines in "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," opposite-sex marriage, monogamy, and reproductive heterosexuality are associated with "Good sex," with an imaginary line separating them from despised "Bad sex" (1993:14, Warner 2000). Since religious scriptures and systems of sexual judgment like those of Protestantism may determine on which side of the line sex falls, obedience to the rules of the hierarchy may make the chance of being "othered" by it less likely. Further, mainline churches continue to be social milieu in which marriage (including same-sex marriage in accepting congregations and denominations) is not only "Good sex" but a high Christian standard. If marriage is, as Matthew Vines argues, "intended to model Christ's love for his church,"

conformity to marriage as a desired standard by queer Christians is not only obedience to such a hierarchy, but is also a practical move in pursuit of being included in congregations (2015:135.)

Hailing the married same-sex couple as an ideal kind of queer Christian can make others less visible, particularly queer people who may interpret the trajectory of queer rights going in different directions or having different goals. Roderick A. Ferguson's points out exclusion in the context of gay liberation in *One-Dimensional Queer* (2019). Ferguson critiques a notion of single-issue politics that becomes retroactively assigned to queer political histories. This makes it appear as if events like the Stonewall uprising and its aftermath were solely about sexuality, and did not include wider issues of race, gender, class, and the deployment of state power. This approach affects the ways queer people in the U.S. measure "progress" in terms of what David L. Eng calls "state legitimacy" (2010:3). Same-sex marriage is among the markers of legitimacy Eng notes, as well as inheritance and service in the armed forces (2010). The approach to thinking of queerness in one-dimensional terms further serves to stifle queer critiques of the state and curtails progress in terms of queer liberation to a limited mainstreaming gay and lesbian sexuality, particularly around recognition of monogamous, long-term same-sex partnerships as Michael Warner (1999) argues in *The Trouble With Normal* (Eng 2010; Ferguson 2019; Vaid 1995). In a similar way, affirming Christians often place so much emphasis on same-sex wedding ceremonies that it becomes central to mainliners' framing of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Another significant consequence of this attention to same-sex marriage is how it contributes to a prioritizing of sexuality over gender identity when thinking about queerness. Framing understandings of queer experience around gay and lesbian attractionality results in overlooking non-cisgender identities in the way Stryker argues is common. An example of the ways in which congregants understood transgender identity and experience as able to be

indistinguishable from an encompassing “LGBTQ+” identity/experience happened on a movie night. Nazareth held a series of film viewing parties in the months following the adoption of the ONA Covenant of Welcome. The task force hoped to keep non-queer members of the congregation focused on learning more about LGBTQ+ issues. Two of these films specifically discussed gender and gender identity, rather than sexual orientation. The first movie night was a showing of *Call Me Malcolm*, a 2005 documentary by Joseph Parlagreco about a transgender seminary student who shares his experiences with faith and gender affirmation. The second movie night – which was better attended than the first – showed the 2017 *National Geographic* documentary *Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric*, directed by Couric. For both films, we sat in Nazareth’s special screening room, a large space in the church basement with a projector, rows of old cinema seats, and a popcorn machine. For Couric’s film, a member of the ONA task force also brought popsicles. About fifteen people attended this screening on a balmy April evening, including three members of the youth group, which was led by Associate Pastor Martha. Penny, the task force member leading the event, began by explaining that she wanted us to watch the film together and then have a thirty-minute discussion of what we had learned.

The lights were dimmed, and the volume was turned way up for the hard of hearing. When the film concluded, Penny shut off the projector and began the discussion, pulling out a brief list of questions she had written prior. She asked participants what they had learned which they could now share with someone else. After a short silence, an ONA task force member named Jeffrey remarked “there’s so much that I didn’t know.” He continued that based on the film, when it comes to gender “There is no right, there is no wrong...you’re all loved in God’s sight.” He also noted that he was happy to have seen intergenerational dialogue between participants in the movie, who brought different personal and experiential perspectives on

whether gender was fluid or fixed. This began a forty-five-minute discussion, sitting in the cinema chairs, which were bolted to the floor and could not be turned around. Participants in the front chairs had to awkwardly sit on their seats sideways if they wanted to see who was talking behind them. Pastor Martha noted, “I liked the way Katie Couric modeled learning,” saying that she felt that the times when Couric did “put her foot in her mouth” were useful for teaching, and she graciously accepted her mistakes. The discussion did not really become a back-and-forth dialogue for awhile, and was more folks speaking up and making a point about a detail from the documentary they did not know, others agreeing, and the room falling back into silence. For example, a participant named Carl noted he did not know about puberty blockers – drugs used to help delay physical changes in adolescents that might not match their gender identities – prior to watching the documentary. Now, he said, he had seen transgender children speak approvingly of the positive impacts of blockers as they discerned whether and how to transition, and felt he better understood. Carl noted that when he thought of LGBTQ+ issues, same-sex marriage always came to mind first, because it was so frequently in the news, but that the documentary had opened him up to a whole array of queer experience he had not considered or even heard about. Back to a period of silence, which Penny broke in noting that before watching the documentary, she did not have any knowledge of groups that did not fit within a strict Western gender binary, including Hijra and Two-Spirit folks.

For Penny, greater knowledge on the complicated relationships between sex, gender, and identity, which she had gotten from watching the film prior to the gathering and preparing discussion questions, had destabilized her confidence in the validity of a gender binary altogether. She explained that she therefore felt compelled to ask, “Would we want to erase the gender binary?” Pastor Martha did not directly answer the question, but remarked that she felt it

was important to remember that the gender binary is a social construct. It held power, she said, because it makes it easier to categorize. The youth participants, who adore Pastor Martha, listened with rapt attention, shaking their heads in affirmation. Jeffrey agreed, remembering that from an early age, he noticed stigma in school directed toward the people “who don’t fit in” when it comes to expectations around gender identity/expression, a testament to how powerful the binary is. Penny concurred with this as well, noting that “we start early” in excluding people. I asked the group what role they felt faith played in the film, and in the propensity to draw boundaries around gender. Pastor Martha responded, “There is a historic propensity of religion to say what is right and wrong,” which could increase the amount of discrimination transgender people face. We then spoke for a bit about how that can be weaponized. Using an example from the documentary, Penny noted how religious people were opposing transgender student Gavin Grimm using the bathroom that affirmed his gender identity and demonstrated publicly during the resulting legal case *Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board*. When Penny asked for any conclusions the group had drawn after seeing the film, several members expressed that Nazareth needed to do a better job at welcoming transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming folks into the church, and that this welcoming might require different actions than welcoming gays and lesbians. The documentary had made clear, Jeffrey expressed, that transgender individuals possess far less privilege than gays and lesbians, and that this disparity would apply to having less privilege in context of religious institutions as well.

This example is useful because it underscores the surprise members had when being confronted with differences between transgender experience and the one-dimensional “LGBTQ+” experience they so often used to frame welcoming at Nazareth. In the lead-up to the ONA vote, much of the education campaign the task force undertook addressed congregational

concerns over sexual orientation, and particularly the prospect of same-sex marriages occurring at Nazareth and married same-sex couples participating in the congregation. As a result, the stark differences in experience based on gender identity that members encountered in *Gender Revolution* were even more destabilizing, as they had previously encountered very little formalized discussion of gender identity and expression. Feelings of destabilization were also present at St. Michael's, following events like the "Coffee and Conversation" discussion focused on gender and pronoun usage. Members who facilitated the Open Hearts Club were especially anticipating this discussion, but afterward some expressed worry that their knowledge of gender identity and expression – and of transgender and nonbinary identities in particular – were not enough to effectively welcome transgender and nonbinary youth in the Open Hearts Club.

Further, while there were no openly transgender members or visitors at Second Presbyterian, several of the parents in the congregation noted that their children went to school with trans students. Based on their friendships and conversations with the parents of these youth, they felt that while the congregation in general would be friendly and welcoming, none of the congregants had been educated enough on topics of gender identity to be confident that they could speak and act in affirming ways. This anxiety was not felt nearly as starkly when it came to welcoming cisgender gays and lesbians, as many of the congregants expressing the most worry about not being adequately focused on gender identity themselves identified as gay or lesbian. This kind of over-emphasis and hyper-focus on white gays and lesbians, who are also cisgender, able-bodied, and middle class – however implicit congregants may claim the focus to be – was present in the congregations, although some members slowly began to explore ways to change their perspectives.

4.6 Different Ways of Considering Difference

A reticence by mainliners in these churches to think about queer inclusion through an intersectional frame comes at a price of conceptualizing queerness in terms of a narrow set of experiences which overlooks a plethora of meaningful categories of identity. Refusing to consider how racism, heterosexism, transphobia, and ableism affect queerphobia truncates the discussion of how the Church may truly welcome, as these forms of inequity are treated as mutually exclusive topics of discussion with differing prognoses for more equitable futures. A lack of reckoning with difference can have many motivations in an ecclesiastical context, not least of all Paul's words in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." But to operationalize such a passage in a way which renders difference mute contributes to a narrow understanding queer experience that renders queer people of color and transgender people invisible, preventing more equitable and intersectional acts of welcoming. In fact, such an understanding can, in the case of conceptualizing the relationship between Christianity and racism, drive members into a complacent (and harmful) sense of colorblindness. Members fail to recognize difference as a quality that could empower and unite a congregation around a cause of social justice, which would include a kind of welcoming that is mindful of the myriad experiences LGBTQ+ people.

Congregants tended to perceive difference more intersectionally, however, when they took part in collective actions and organizing on topics related to social justice. In the various ways which members participated, they found opportunities to shift their perspectives on difference – in the sense of discerning linkages between social identities or between systems of inequality – and then discuss those shifts with others. These experiences were rarely directly

connected to church life, occurred primarily off the church grounds, and were not focused on queer inclusion in worship contexts. Nevertheless, such actions profoundly affected participants emotionally, and affected their views around queerness and welcome. In conversation with each other, both during the events and retrospectively, members used their experiences to think about their common project of welcoming people into their churches, understanding that their own experiences, wants, and needs, could not always be the litmus test for what potential seekers and visitors might desire in their search for a church home and Christian faith.

Across all three congregations, members participated in events, groups, and organizing which were focused on social justice. The kinds of participation were both independent and part of church groups, but in neither case were the initiatives based in or run from the members' own congregations. Some of these groups were centered around queer advocacy. I worked with several LGBTQ+-affirming grassroots organizations which were regional or statewide, to get a better sense of how LGBTQ+ inclusion and participation were being advocated for on a wider regional or statewide level. Members of the three congregations either participated in the groups I selected, had friends or colleagues of congregants participating, or attended community events the groups held. One of these was "Michiganders for Justice." Dating back to the 1990s, the interfaith (though mostly Christian) group comprised of clergy and laity primarily works to educate political leaders on the importance of LGBTQ+ civil rights, while also striving for greater inclusion in individual religious congregations. For example, two major concerns of this group included urging the state's governor and attorney general to allow same-sex marriages to proceed after a ban was struck down in a U.S. District Court in 2014, and to lobby the Michigan legislature to amend the states Elliot-Larsen Civil Rights Act of 1976 to explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. There was also overlap

between denominational grassroots coalition and these organizations. The Open and Affirming Coalition's coordinator for Michigan, for example, was a member of the board and frequent meeting attendee. The board also included representatives from the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), the Unitarian Universalist Church, Catholicism and Judaism.

The number of participants allowed the organization a greater ability and more fundraising power to organize events the denominational groups did not. These events usually included a yearly conference which brought together Michigan faith communities for workshops on LGBTQ+ issues, revolving around a general theme like human rights. In addition to regular monthly meetings at a UMC church, community events like the annual conference, and speaking engagements, these organizations undertook a great deal of communication via email and their webpage. This communication included email listservs, to inform participants and interested people outside of leadership of these organizations of upcoming gatherings, actions, and votes. An administrator (or administrators) on each of these listservs may also send out relevant news stories or video clips to subscribers on a regular basis, keeping members and contributors abreast of relevant developments around queer issues in the U.S. and abroad. In this group, there was a strong focus on prioritizing transgender issues, and raising awareness of people of faith in Michigan on the kinds of discrimination non-cisgender people face. When congregants participated in Michiganders for Justice events, then, they often had similar reactions to the Nazareth movie night participants, understanding they needed to expand their conception of "LGBTQ+" and the steps needed to cultivate LGBTQ+ inclusive environments and policies.

When it came to actions that conveyed the importance of intersectionality, however, congregants found more opportunity to question their understandings of difference as part of

direct actions which were associated with national movements that did not exclusively deal with queer issue like “Michiganders for Justice” did. Such work included marches, rallies, and vigils that coincided with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement – in 2014 and 2015 following the murder of Michael Brown, and again in 2020 following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd – March For Our Lives to advocate for gun control legislation, and the Global Climate Strike in 2019. Nazareth members in particular organized groups to attend these events together. They wore black buttons with white and red lettering that said “BLACK LIVES MATTER. Ucc.org.,” they held signs for divestment from fossil fuels that referenced their membership in the UCC. St. Michael’s members participated in the 2017 Women’s March in both the state capital of Lansing and Washington D.C., and annually wore orange clothing to reference the #wearorange campaign for an end to gun violence.

A popular avenue of organizing which members across all three churches invested time was the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. This 2018 anti-poverty campaign, which was led by Disciples of Christ minister William Barber II and Presbyterian minister Liz Theoharis, drew from Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s 1968 demands for U.S. government intervention in combating poverty. Fifty years later, Barber and Theoharis called for nonviolent civil disobedience and a form of “fusion politics” which unites groups into a multi-faith, multiracial coalition to fight King’s “triple evils” of racism, poverty, and militarism, with a strong emphasis on climate stewardship being added (Poor People’s Campaign 2022). Parishioners participated in mass meetings and acts of protest at the Michigan’s capitol building. Nazareth launched a multi-week education campaign, to inform congregants of the demands and methods of the movement. Led by Associate Pastor Martha, two

separate groups met in the church's "gallery" to become better acquainted with the demands and methods of the movement, one on weekdays and one on weeknights.

When I attended my first weekday meeting, I found the large airy room was decorated with framed collages of photographs from church events, some dating back to the 1980s. The tables were arranged in a U-shape facing the door, with papers and books stacked at the ends of the table on each side. There was also a television and an easel with large sheets of paper on it, with several markers, so pastor Martha could write down notes in real time. The group consisted of seven congregants and myself. She gave us each a copy of William Barber II's *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* and a blue folder she had prepared for each of us with various documents in it, which she added to with other papers throughout the session. These documents included 1) two brochures put out by the Poor People's Campaign (PPC); 2) a list of PPC's fundamental principles; 3) a fact sheet entitled "The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America's 50 Years after the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Systemic Racism, Poverty, War Economy/Militarism & Our National Morality;" 4) a statement from Michigan Conference of the UCC, making an official endorsement of the PPC; 5) a brochure for the original 1968 Poor People's Campaign by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; 6) Martin Luther King Jr's August 1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail, and the April 1963 Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen to which King responds; and 6) King's December 1967 Announcement of the PPC. As she prepared to start the session, Pastor Martha asked us to glance at the documents, and asked "What is on your hearts and minds today?" A few folks shared their excitement to be in the meeting, and then began to diligently leaf through the blue folders. Despite the excitement, the room was rather quiet throughout the hour-long session, and sometimes Martha had to be patient in getting a response from the group.

After giving some logistics to the group, Pastor Martha asked us to go around the room one by one and introduce ourselves, explaining to the group why we had each come to the meeting. She also encouraged us to share any specific questions, challenges, or struggles which we brought with us, related to this topic. Responses varied from participants, from the minimum wage, to affordable housing, to the ethical treatment of migrants and refugees. When one member asked if there would be an opportunity to march or otherwise engage in direct action for PPC, she responded that there was “40 Days of Action” planned by the PPC to serve as the launch of the revived campaign. After we had the class over the next few weeks, and decided if we were comfortable with protesting, she would have an optional trip to Lansing for an action with the group, representing the church, but that members should not feel obligated. Pastor Martha said she wanted to “start the meeting with song” and went to the video screen, bringing up a video produced by PPC of a group of people standing in a church sanctuary, teaching the lyrics and melody the song “Somebody’s Hurting My Brother.”

Somebody’s hurting my brother, and it’s gone on far too long,

Yes it’s gone one far too long, I’ll tell you it’s gone one far too long.

Somebody’s hurting my brother, and it’s gone on far too long,

And we won’t be silent anymore.

She encouraged us to sing along with the video, and while those in the video were clapping and swaying, the group was quite motionless, except for her. When the video ended, Pastor Martha sat back down at the table and encouraged us to improvise our own verses. Since “hurting my brother” is five syllables, we could switch out the words to a five-syllable phrase about whatever issues we were most worried about. The suggestions, which were not all five syllables but spoken in the rhythm of the song, included “Somebody’s hurting my friend,” “Somebody’s

cutting our wages,” “Somebody’s selling those guns,” and “Somebody’s shooting our children.” At the last suggestion, there were audible shudders, and Martha led us in another round of singing, using the improvised verses. She did this, she explained, because it was important to put the things that were in our hearts into our potential work the campaign, or our conversations about it with others.

Martha then passed out bibles to the group, saying there was a scriptural aspect to the campaign that we should think about together. She asked us to turn to Matthew 25:35-40, which one participant read aloud:

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

After we finished reading, Pastor Martha said it was vital for us each to follow the example of Jesus and honor the goodness of every human being, our neighbors, through our service.

Whether that service involved work with PPC or not, it was the duty of all Christians to care for “our neighbors.” Helene, a member of the ONA committee, spoke up, saying the notion of neighbors resonated with her. “It’s not just your next-door neighbor,” she said, noting that the verses from Matthew speaks of “strangers” who are equally-worthy of love. Pastor Martha smiled and shook her head enthusiastically, replying that she had thought about this as well. She had begun to think of the whole of the society around her in terms of “neighbors,” who had

different needs and faced different challenges. Pastor Martha asked the rest of us to keep thinking about this scripture through the rest of the day's discussion, considering what "neighbors" in our lives were in need of love, care, or support.

She asked us to pull out King's 1967 statement, and to read the four-page document on our own, taking a few minutes to think about what stood out. When we finished reading, Helene commented that the letter was full of "scary statements," and Pastor Martha replied, "say more about that." She used this phrase frequently, in these meetings and in the weekly prayer circle and conversation she led in the church lounge, as a way of encouraging folks in the group that their thoughts were valid and needed in the conversation. Before Helene could answer, a choir member named Kallie interjected noting that she too was struck by the severity of the document, but also by its continued relevance: "It could have been written today!" She continued that the frightening aspect of the letter to her was that it was still applicable, even in terms of specific oppressions. Helene shook her head in agreement. Kallie continued that she saw contemporary parallels between a line in the statement in which King is critical of the Vietnam War to current U.S. interventions in the Middle East and Central America, saying that she felt American domestic politics and international relations have changed very little since many in group were children. "Only the names of the places have changed." Pastor Martha then asked us to pull out the 2018 PPC fact sheet. She assigned specific participants to read one of its five subheadings: systemic racism, poverty, jobs and income, war economy and militarism, and ecological devastation. Each of us were tasked to find something that struck or moved us to report it back to the group at large. She asked us not necessarily to regurgitate figures we read verbatim but share the parts of it which affected us most profoundly, and tell the others why we wanted to share it. As each person reported back, Pastor Martha noted of the topics, "These all link." Flipping back

to King's statement, she argued that this was a connection King also recognized, in his calling for a coalition of disenfranchised Americans which was multiracial and multiethnic, bound together instead by common disenfranchisement and a sense of goodwill. Because each of these forms of marginalization, oppression, and violence were linked to one another, Martha continued, it would be impossible for PPC to dismantle one without also dismantling the others. A participant named Junie, who had been sitting quietly and not verbally participating up until that point, muttered under her breath, "we've just messed everything up!" A few other members nodded their heads, looking grim.

Pastor Martha allowed a few minutes of contemplative reflection, as she searched through Barber's book. She broke the silence to exclaim that she had enjoyed reading about Barber's work in North Carolina before calling for a revival of the PPC. The example she gave was *Moral Mondays*, protests undertaken in 2013 to oppose a slate of controversial partisan legislation passed by Republican majorities in the North Carolina General Assembly and Governor Pat McCrory – the same governor who would sign North Carolina's discriminatory and transphobic "Bathroom Bill" in 2016 (Kopan and Scott 2016). The lesson Pastor Martha wanted the group to consider was that those who joined in organizing were expected to acknowledge the realities of racism and economic injustice in the U.S. She explained that this was important for her because, in order for PPC to call for moral voices in the country to speak out about injustices and call for meaningful changes, systems of injustices cannot be viewed in isolation, and critiques against them should be unified. "The stories we tell and will hear in this work won't be about racism, poverty, war, or climate change, but all four." The group smiled, and said they felt empowered, even though the severe problems were complicated and tangled

together. We stood up, joined hands to form a circle, and recited the Lord's Prayer before leaving the gallery.

4.7 "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me"

Nazareth's meetings on PPC organizing serve a useful example in that they stressed a sense of connectedness for congregants between systems of marginalization. While queer issues did not explicitly come up all the time, participation in events like Pastor Martha's PPC meetings reinforced a sense among congregants that the equitable treatment of LGBTQ+ people could and should be contextualized among their wider concerns about discrimination in the United States. Further, participating in social justice organizing did not result in immediate or drastic changes in congregational approaches to actions of welcoming for queer folks, but combined with events like the viewing of *Gender Revolution*, congregants developed a recognition that understandings of queer identity needed to be reconceptualized, to consist of a much wider set of experiences and perspectives. This move closely mirrors Crenshaw's own call in her article "Mapping the Margins" to consider organized identity groups as coalitions or potential coalitions. She describes the potential for race, for example, to be the basis of a coalition of women and men of color, which need not be confined to perspectives from one gender (1991:1299). Further, race can serve as the basis of a coalition of straight and gay people of color, using coalitional power to critique cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism (1991:1299). "With identity reconceptualized, it may be easier to understand the need for and summon the courage to challenge groups that are after all, in one sense, "home" to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home" (1991:1299). As church can be conceived as a "home" in the way Crenshaw frames it, the challenge for overcoming marginalization involves calling out how the

LGBTQ+ folks most regularly finding “home” in mainline churches is structured around existing members’ intersectional identities as white and cisgender.

Members use experiences in social justice organizing to think about a set of goals which they strongly connect to the goal of their church “home:” an overarching project of providing a hospitable welcome to people into their congregation. After participating in organizing with groups like PPC, many members became much more vocal in the position that their own experiences, wants, and needs, could not always be the litmus test for what potential seekers and visitors might desire in their search for “a church home,” mirroring Crenshaw’s language. This understanding complemented an already-strong sense that being part of a welcoming church involved understanding other circumstances and worldviews which one might not share with those around them in the pews. Members were already, to a degree, acknowledging the ideological diversity of their congregations to mitigate conflict, but now applied that acknowledgement to other aspects of identity. Their own identities could not be considered as paradigmatic or foundational in a church space which is meant to express a commitment to extravagant welcome. Such a move, as Crenshaw alleges, does not eschew or hide difference, but better acknowledges difference. In the case of LGBTQ+ issues, this manifested in non-queer congregants desiring to further “lean in” and educate themselves on diversity within the queer community, and queer members reminding their pew-mates that they could not individually speak on behalf of all queer people.

Congregational participation in social justice organizing over the subsequent years after my fieldwork resulted in more emphasis on using a frame of intersectionality, and these experiences began to bear fruit over time in terms of members’ priorities. At Second Presbyterian, for example, while there was so much initial resistance to adopting an affiliation

with More Light Presbyterians, the congregation did become a “Matthew 25 Church” (in reference to the verses from Matthew’s gospel Pastor Martha read in the PPC meeting). The session voted to participate in the Matthew 25 initiative through their denomination’s Presbyterian Mission Agency, a national body which works on ministries around themes of compassion, peace, and justice. The church website gives a summary of this affiliation on its homepage.

Matthew 25:31-46 calls us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities. Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor (Presbyterian Mission Agency 2022).

The Matthew 25 initiative has three planks to which participating groups must commit: congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. Particular actions that will demonstrate this commitment are not specified, which has led to the session brainstorming with members of the congregation how best to meet their commitments. Like Pastor Martha’s work with PPC at Nazareth, Second Presbyterian’s leadership has determined that one step is to better educate congregants on the intersections of racism with forms of economic oppression. Additionally, leadership developed language for the church website and promotional materials affirming support for the Black community, #BLM, and antiracist praxis as a key facet of Christian life. In 2020, amid a flurry of statements and pronouncements from across the mainline denominations decrying racism, Second Presbyterian launched a series of adult education classes and reading groups related to antiracism. Groups of members participated together in local and regional Black Lives Matter marches, carrying signs that read “Want Peace? Work for Justice,” “PRO BLM,” and “MOMMA” (a reference to George

Floyd's last words). Several members who had vociferously favored affiliation with MLP years before, like Amber and Sarah, noted that while they were disappointed that the church had not pursued that course of action, they were extremely proud of the "Matthew 25" designation. They hoped the commitments to antiracism they were making would ultimately improve their methods of maintaining welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ Christians as well, since it was a project members already felt firmly committed to, even without an official welcoming designation. By better educating themselves on topics of inequality, exploitation, and oppression which they had hitherto avoided, they would be more equipped to continue undertaking welcoming actions which would ensure a more inclusive space for all marginalized people.

Chapter 5 “Make Me a Servant Today:” LGBTQ+ Participation and Agencies in “Declining” Mainline Congregations

5.1 Empty Rooms, Full Hearts

Second Presbyterian’s organist walked down the narrow steps from the choir loft to a grand piano which sat near the front of the sanctuary. He began a lively postlude, a musical number which signaled the end of the service. While in some churches this might be a sign for congregants to get up and begin to file out of the pews, here everyone sat in respectful silence so they could listen to him play. A visitor who was not used to this procedure stood as if to leave, but abruptly sat again when he realized no one else had risen. As the echoes of the last few chords died away, the congregation applauded and then began to mingle, some leaving directly and others moving more leisurely to the back of the sanctuary to greet Pastor Camille as they left or chat with those next to them.

Word had spread that Laura, who knew the nineteenth century building and its subsequent additions better than almost anyone, was going to give me a tour of the church after the service. Since this was not something she regularly did, several other members joined us, mostly newer and recently joined parishioners. We began by walking from the sanctuary, through the choir room, where the group practiced weekly and stored their light powder blue robes and white stoles. Laura was delighted that multiple people were interested in seeing some of the spaces, and enthusiastically ushered us one by one up a narrow wooden staircase, to a suite of rooms that made up the church’s original structure. She was famous for her decorations in and around the church, and the first room we entered was full of items she had used. Candles

employed in centerpieces in the social hall sat in neat rows. Tucked into a corner were the small wooden stool and colorful bolts of fabric Laura had arranged in disarray one Sunday morning in front of the pulpit to resemble the tables and stalls of the Jerusalem temple Jesus turned over in John 2. Large clay water jugs from another sanctuary display to represent Jesus meeting the woman at the well in John 4 sat alongside. But upon leaving this room, which saw a flurry of activity any time Laura needed to decorate, and was therefore sunlit and clean, the mood changed. We entered a maze of dim, dusty, forsaken rooms, serving as storage spaces for more than a century of boxes, chairs, and abandoned decorations Laura and others did not use. Old paperwork and various miscellaneous items were stacked haphazardly. A print of the Eric Enstrom photograph “Grace” ominously loomed from the wall of one darkened room, depicting an elderly man with his hands folded in silent prayer. Before Laura turned on the light in this room, only the ghostly shape of the man’s face peeked out through the murky darkness. In the mid-twentieth-century, new walls had been built at the front of the sanctuary to create a large apse. While the walls and ceiling of the sanctuary were now a stark white, the original ceiling behind the apse walls still showed the original abstract floral patterns it had been painted with, bursts of red and blue which still impressed despite their age.

Laura noted that most of the rooms we passed through were designated as storage when “the new wing” was built on the east side of the original building and expanded from the 1970s up until the early 2000s, more than doubling the size of the church complex. These types of large additions are typical of mainline churches and were generally constructed in period in the 1940s and 1950s when the “Seven Sisters” found their greatest stability and boost in membership. At Second Presbyterian, their ambitious three-story addition was meant to be bursting at the seams with congregants. When we reached it in our tour, however, only two rooms were in regular use:

a social hall and a kitchen on the ground floor. Apart from the few spaces rented to a homeschool program, an art group, and a Zumba class, the rest of the new wing was also used as storage, shrouded in darkness, and buried under thin films of dust and shimmering cobwebs. We ended the tour at a set of double doors which led outside to a flat stretch of grass, blanketed by January snow. Laura noted that a gymnasium had been planned for this open lot, to be connected to the church through the double doors, but it was never built. The sharp drop-off of youth involved with the church made it unnecessary, and the massive loss of members due to the church's schism had made it financially impossible.



Figure 6 "The new wing," Second Presbyterian

We had passed a former youth room earlier in the tour, with Bible verses the youth had spray painted a decade or two before still covering the walls. Unlike the old ceiling patterns, this paint looked faded and drab. Looking increasingly crestfallen as we passed from room to room, Laura noted that since some of the spaces were relatively new, she wished more of them could be used. In a building with seemingly endless doors and hallways, only a few rooms regularly housed people. It was unlikely that any more rooms would be filled unless more outside renters came forward. While the new members had begun the tour with wide smiles across their faces, passing from empty room to empty room had left some noticeably somber.

A few months prior to this tour, another event occurred at St. Michael's which was similarly atypical, bringing the entire congregation together on a crisp Fall morning in rapt anticipation. We gathered for the marriage of Helen and her partner, Darlene, the first official same-sex wedding to occur in the church. Helen and Darlene had been church members for several years and were very active, participating on the bishop's committee and helping to run the Open Hearts Club. This was the first time such a union would occur in the church since the 2015 Episcopal General Convention approved resolution A036 to change the marriage "canons" of TEC to allow clergy to officiate same sex marriages, and A054, which provided two new marriage liturgies (Episcopal Archives 2022). "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage" and "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2" both have gender-neutral language that can pertain to same-sex couples. These liturgies are in "trial use" until the next revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Further, 2018 General Convention resolution B012 assured that both liturgies would be available in all parishes/missions and dioceses, to ensure "convenient" access to these rites regardless of location (Episcopal Archives 2022). If a particular bishop objects to same-sex marriages in their diocese, another bishop would be invited to provide pastoral care.

Prior to these monumental changes, Mother Sophia had been able to use “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” at the behest of her bishop, approved by the 2012 Convention. But that was not the marriage liturgy that Helen and Darlene’s heterosexual pewmates could use, should they decide to be married in the church.

On the day of the wedding, the small sanctuary was standing room only. Since the marriage rite is intended to accompany the “Holy Eucharist,” which is what the BCP calls the entire Episcopal service, it took place during a regular Sunday gathering of the congregation. More than one congregant approached me and said it might be a good idea for me to be a greeter, as some of Helen and Darlene’s LGBTQ+ friends who were not churchgoers would attend. Since I was queer myself, they reasoned, I would set them at ease. Not sure whether to feel lovingly affirmed or patronized, I indeed greeted attendees as they entered with a wide smile, handing them bulletins with the marriage rite printed for them to follow along. When the opening hymn concluded, Mother Sophia stood in front of the altar, beaming, and called Helen and Darlene forward. More than a few tears were shed as we watched the brides take their place beside their vicar. To her left was Helen in a bright teal and azure sundress, and Darlene was on her right, wearing a blue button-up shirt and neatly pressed khaki pants. Mother Sophia read from the liturgy “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage:”

Dear friends in Christ, in the name of God and the Church, we have come together today with Helen and Darlene, to witness the vows they make, committing themselves to one another in marriage according to the laws of the state of Michigan.

Forsaking all others, they will bind themselves to one another in a covenant of mutual fidelity and steadfast love, remaining true to one another in heart, body, and mind, as long as they both shall live.

The lifelong commitment of marriage is not to be entered into lightly or thoughtlessly, but responsibly and with reverence. Let us pray, then, that God will give them the strength to remain steadfast in what they vow this day. Let us also pray for the generosity to support them in the commitment they undertake and for the wisdom to see God at work in their life together.

After a *collect* (a brief prayer), lessons, the gospel reading, and a sermon, the couple joined Mother Sophia at the altar again, this time for longer prayers, the vows, and the exchange of rings. The rite concluded with Mother Sophia reading from the liturgy:

Now that Helen and Darlene have exchanged vows of love and fidelity in the presence of God and the Church, I pronounce that they are married according to the laws of the state of Michigan and bound to one another as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

Let us pray. Most gracious God, we praise you for the tender mercy and unfailing care revealed to us in Jesus the Christ and for the great joy and comfort bestowed upon us in the gift of human love. We give you thanks for Helen and Darlene, and the covenant of faithfulness they have made. Pour out the abundance of your Holy Spirit upon them. Keep them in your steadfast love; protect them from all danger; fill them with your wisdom and peace; lead them in holy service to each other and the world.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you, and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace, that you may please God in body and soul. God make you a sign of the loving-kindness and steadfast fidelity manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior, and bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet, where he lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The marriage had been performed. The service continued with the Passing of the Peace and celebration of the Eucharist. A large wedding cake and several sandwich platters awaited us

downstairs in the social hall, and the conversation was giddy among members. Tears of joy continued to be shed well into the afternoon.

Agency Amid Decline

In 2017, evangelical writer Ed Stetzer wrote for the *Washington Post*, “If current trends continue, mainline Protestantism has about 23 Easters left.” I read this quote to Pastor Martha from my laptop as we sat in her office, surrounded by books, knick-knacks, and a stack of board games she had purchased for the youth group. She looked up at me and laughed, replying, “Easter isn’t going anywhere!” Nazareth prides itself on its yearly Easter Sunday services, featuring hired instrumentalists and dozens of potted lilies spread throughout the sanctuary. In fact, the church has an entire Holy Week slate of events: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, a Saturday vigil, and a sunrise service on Easter morning at a local cemetery. To lose those traditions, she continued, would be a deep blow to the congregation, and the membership would not permit it. Despite Pastor Martha’s reassurance of the durability of the Easter holiday, if Stetzer’s statement is accurate, the number of mainline churches in existence to celebrate it might be vastly reduced. Combined with other sources of volatility within mainline congregations, this matter is of extreme concern to many parishioners.

Stetzer, the executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, may not be the most impartial voice to speak to a decline of mainline Protestantism, but his pessimism is shared by many. Since the 1960s, all “Seven Sisters” have been synonymous with notions of waning and atrophy. Church membership supports these notions, with Pew’s Religious Landscape Study (RLS) finding in 2014 “that 14.7% of U.S. adults are affiliated with the mainline Protestant tradition – a sharp decline from 18.1% ...in 2007. Mainline Protestants have declined at a faster rate than any other major Christian group, including Catholics and

evangelical Protestants” (Pew Research Center 2022). Denominational records reveal that each of the mainline denominations have steadily lost members over the last decade. The Episcopal Church saw a decrease in U.S. parishes and missions from 6,510 in 2015 to 6,355 in 2020, and a decrease in active baptized members from 1,799,335 to 1,576,702 (The General Convention of the Episcopal Church 2022). Between 2017 and 2020, PCUSA congregations fell from 9,304 to 8,925, and from 1,415,053 active members to 1,245,354 (PCUSA 2022). Finally, the UCC went from 5,287 congregations and 1,080,199 members in 2009 to 4,794 congregations and 773,539 members in 2020 (United Church of Christ 2022). These numbers were affected to a degree by the Covid-19 pandemic, but they reflect the kind of steady decline which has been going on for half a century. None of the three churches I worked in were in any imminent danger of closure or dissolution, since their respective memberships and finances were relatively stable. But anxieties over the long-term futures of institutions like theirs were acute. When congregants departed or passed away those who remained felt trepidation about what could happen to their church if too many fell away from the membership roles?

Placing too much emphasis on why members are *leaving*, however, invariably obscures or overlooks why others are *staying* or joining these congregations, especially growing numbers of LGBTQ+ people. It also minimizes the kinds of processes queer Christians undergo in investigating and growing their own faith. I therefore focus on the cultivation of queer religiosity, in particular hearkening back to William Simon and John Gagnon’s argument in “Homosexuality: Formation of a Sociological Perspective” that, “More than asking about the homosexual’s religious orientation and how it expresses his homosexuality, we must also learn to ask how his homosexuality expresses his commitment to the religious” (1998:65). Expanding my focus from gay men, I apply this exploration of queer people’s commitment to exploring the

sacred (Nelson and Longfellow 1994). Brandan Robertson claims, “The Spirit of God is moving among sexual and gender minorities on every continent around the world,” an argument my LGBTQ+ interlocutors embodied in their presence and their dynamism within their congregations (2018:xiv).

The prospects of shrinking, downsizing, or closing churches have become exceedingly familiar for mainliners. Yet surging numbers of openly queer participants buck the unfavorable trends. As Robertson points out from Pew’s study, “while every major demographic of Christians was on the decline, one of the only areas there was a steady uptick in identification as ‘Christian’ was among the LGBT+ community” (2018:xiv). As mainline congregations face uncertain futures, LGBTQ+ people making space in their churches is not only an act of reinvigoration and reconciliation, but a significant change to Christianity. In 2020, the Williams Institute reported similar trends, concluding that around 5.3 million LGBT adults are religious, and about 1.5 million are Protestant (The Williams Institute 2022). These 5.3 million religious LGBT adults includes sixty-five percent of LGBT adults over the age of sixty-five (The Williams Institute 2022). As Melissa Wilcox writes, “Out of two diverging roads they create two converging ones, reinterpreting their belief systems in such a way that LGBT identity and religious commitment are not just compatible but are also intertwined (2003:11).” Not only are queer Christians contending with the stigma and discrimination associated with their identity (Goffman 1963), but they are also working to belong in congregations that, in many cases, are uncertain about their future vitality. Listening to how queer members understood themselves as part of their institutions is in keeping with Robertson’s call to heed the stories of queer Christians who are actively reconciling with congregations. Exploring how LGBTQ+ mainliners understand their impacts on churches provides important insights into how members find purpose in being

congregants. By exploring how this sense of purpose is cultivated, we gain vital insights into why significant numbers of mainline parishioners remain within their churches despite possible “decline.” I will focus on two aspects of church life through which queer Christians cultivate religiosity and display agency. First, through their participation in church life, LGBTQ+ congregants build community and find what kinds of commitments they want to make to the institutions. Second, LGBTQ+ parishioners to engage with non-queer pew-mates in service work and outreach, allowing them to explore what being part of a Christian institution means to them.

Focusing on how LGBTQ+ church members find purpose in their congregation displays their agency in settings that, while often not overtly hostile to LGBTQ+ inclusion, are still precarious spaces in many ways. Queer congregants may still feel they are present in what Erving Goffman (1963:17-18) calls a “mixed social situation,” in which members who do not carry a particular stigma are interacting with those who do. Anxiety about the future, where the institution itself might seem in danger of collapse, only exacerbates the anxieties already present in such interactions. The feelings of being abject or out of place that I discussed in Chapter 4 are likely present, leading to uncertainty and even fear. Yet LGBTQ+ Christians persist as agents, acting in the interests of their own religiosity and of their congregations. For a framing of agency, I mobilize Saba Mahmood’s work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Mahmood argues both against treating agency as a universal concept and for viewing agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action” (2005:157). By their very presence in the pew, in the line of congregants to receive the Eucharist, and at the session or council table, LGBTQ+ mainliners are challenging hegemonic norms around gender and sexuality. They are inserting their voices into debates about their own identities from which they were once excluded (Comstock 1997). This challenge of norms is

especially present when queer congregants speak out against policies they see as exclusionary and discriminatory, and support alternative policies they see as more inclusive (and, in their framing, more Christian). But LGBTQ+ congregants usually do not challenge all aspects of the church, nor do they seek the institution to fail. Rather, they profess love for the church. They regularly show an incredible amount of care for the institutions and their continued strength. Their desire is much more to be present, to work alongside the rest of the congregation, and to retain a sense of normalcy and continuity in congregational life. Thus, LGBTQ+ Christians like my queer interlocutors help to keep activities and traditions going, in hopes that key aspects of church life will not change or be disrupted.

Mahmood's conceptualization of agency is not necessarily linked to resistance against established norms, describing religious acts that, as Paul Christopher Johnson argues, "seem to contravene individual interests" (2021:9). LGBTQ+ church members occupy a position in their congregations which is more akin to what Mahmood calls an *agentival captivity*, in that their actions constitute, inhabit, or even embrace many norms in their congregation and denomination (2005:15). As Johnson notes, "The religious often value disciplined submission or collective solidarity over individual agency. Simply enduring, maintaining a tradition, is also acting" (2021:9). As a caveat, few groups are more immersed in the liberal progressive imaginary which Mahmood urges us to step beyond when considering human flourishing than mainline Protestants in the United States. Still, Mahmood's analysis offers a helpful frame to consider how traditionally marginalized queer Christians act as agents as they increase their participation at the level of the local church. My queer interlocutors work alongside their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, embracing norms and traditions which in some cases have been used

previously to exclude them from participation, as they seek fuller understanding of what their newfound belonging in their churches means.

5.2 The Mainline in Decline?

On a balmy day in May when I visited Delia, who was volunteering at the front desk of the Nazareth office, she pulled a thick leatherbound book from a nearby shelf and beckoned me over. She explained that the book contained the congregation's youth confirmation records for roughly the past century. Confirmation, which takes place in many Christian traditions, is a series of steps to prepare baptized church attendees (often young people) for full membership in the congregation. In most Protestant groups that practice confirmation, it consists of a series of classes with a clergyperson and culminates in a public profession of faith before the congregation. Delia opened the book to the late 1950s, showing me page after page of youth confirmands for a single year. Then, with a sigh, she flipped through the pages to the 2010s. Here, multiple years of confirmands were confined to a single page. The spaces between rows of names were much broader than before. The care in penmanship had also waned, with the most recent entries an informal scrawl. "There just aren't as many kids anymore. Not as many young families," Delia noted, crestfallen. Her disappointment typifies a common question among mainliners, what William R. Hutchison summarizes as, "Where have all the young folks gone?" The lament usually focuses on a lack of engagement in church life by younger people, especially members' children and grandchildren under age forty. Many older congregants charge that young families are either neglecting the importance of being part of a congregation by scheduling conflicting Sunday activities like sporting events or have fully given up on churchgoing (Hutchison et al. 1991:132-133). Delia told me that she initially resented her

grandchild's soccer team having matches during the hours of church services, making her choose between worship and watching the game. She used to feel that filling Sundays with non-church activities was a violation of the fourth commandment.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it (Exodus 20:8-11).

With time, Delia said she has “resigned” to missing church for soccer games, and to her relatives not attending altogether: “If I can spend time with my granddaughters at the soccer field, I think that’s what God would want me to do,” Delia said.

The association between mainline Protestantism and decline has been made for the last six decades, as scholarship like Jason Lantzer’s work explores, with the period from the 1960s and 70s onward initiating a state of perpetual declension for the more progressive wing of American Protestantism, when even outsiders became aware of the noticeable shrinking of mainline institutions (2012:85, Wuthnow 1997). After the mainline denominations enjoyed a heyday in both membership and public influence in the midcentury (Balmer and Winner 2002, Bendroth 2002, Coffman 2013, Lantzer 2012:49, Wuthnow 1988, Wuthnow and Evans 2002), such a jarring halt to growth and precipitous decline has caused scholars, theologians, and practitioners alike to question whether the “Seven Sisters” retain any claim to what William R. Hutchison calls a “position of ‘establishment’” and of dominance in terms of mainline societal influences as America’s “religious core” (1987:6).

In their edited volume, *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America*, James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk (2018) discuss how these substantial changes to mainline denominations constitute part of a massive reconfiguration of American religious landscape which has been ongoing since at least the 1960s. Utilizing data from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) – funded by the Lilly Endowment and using representative national surveys from 1990, 2000, and 2008 – Hudnut-Beumler and Silk connect three phenomena to this reconfiguration. The first is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, which “introduced significant populations of adherents of world religions hitherto little represented in the United States,” both non-Christians and Christians (particularly Catholics) who did not match the previous ethnic or demographic trends around membership (2018:ix). Mainliners now find themselves in a period of American history in which the country is seeing increases in religious diversity (Eck 2007, Patel 2018). American religious identity is increasingly being defined alongside religious pluralism and spirited engagement with those of other faiths (Eck 2001, Rosenblum 1998, Wuthnow 2005).

The second phenomenon is constituted by shifts within American Protestantism where Protestants which are not part of the mainline denominations outnumber mainliners in many parts of the country, both in members and degrees of cultural and political influence (2018:x). This affects where scholarly and popular attention is placed. For example, studies of American Christian disaffiliation from their institutions pay disproportionately more attention to members of evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, and Pentecostal traditions, as they are the most highly visible when it comes to a standard or typical “Christian” position on pressing social issues like LGBTQ+ rights (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Many churches in these traditions operate with more independence at the local level than mainline churches, have less set

denominational infrastructure, and place greater emphasis on individualism and personal choice. This corresponds to Roof and McKinney's argument for a rise in religious "privitism," "the tendency toward highly individualized religious psychology without the strong supportive attachments to believing communities" (1987:6-7). If emphasis on younger Christians leaving their churches is focused on non-mainline Protestant traditions, mainline claims to any sort of cultural hegemony seem even more questionable.

The third phenomenon pertains to people leaving churches, that is, a decrease in religious identification altogether, and the rise of "nones" as a category. Numbers of Americans who are "nones" and lack an active affiliation with any religious tradition are rapidly multiplying (Burge 2021, Jones 2018). Pew reported in 2021 that this group now comprises an estimated three-in-ten U.S. adults, while about six-in-ten identify as Christian (Cooper, Cox, Lienesch, and Jones 2016). When Second Presbyterian invited a pastor who leads a weekly gathering of "nones" in southeast Michigan to give a "Courageous Conversation," she referred to "nones" as "spiritually curious but institutionally suspicious." They often retain some degree of personal belief, even exploring that belief individually or as part of a small group. But as Hudnut-Beumler and Silk contend, "nones" view religious identity as chosen and mutable rather than ascribed (2018:xi). Affiliation with a particular religious group is rejected for a number of reasons, according to the pastor's "Courageous Conversation" talk. She argued that the rejection can often be related to a sense that established religious traditions condone or promote the oppression of marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) argue that a great deal of those Americans who have disaffiliated from Christian groups are younger congregants leaving for political reasons, namely in opposition to Christian homophobia and transphobia.

Each of these three phenomena have constituted shocks to the mainline and has produced a prevailing sense of uncertainty within the denominations regarding their continued influence. Lantzer writes, “For the majority of Americans in the twenty-first century, the Seven Sisters no longer reflect where they worship...Simply put, the Seven Sisters, from a numerical standpoint, are no longer the majority denominations, and thus no longer the face of American Christianity” (2012:1-2). Another major factor in these seemingly tenuous relationship with visibility and relevance is that mainline denominations lack the publicly recognizable faces they once had in abundance. While mainliners claimed a great deal of cultural clout in this heyday period, and the likes of Paul Tillich, Norman Vincent Peale, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Reinhold Niebuhr overlapped in their roles as theologians and well-known and respected public intellectuals, the voices of mainliners on a national scale have grown ever quieter. The work of mainline theologians who congregants read and study today rarely top bestseller lists and are no longer prominently displayed on the shelves of American libraries and bookstores. They are overshadowed by popular authors of evangelical or Charismatic traditions with global name recognition such as Joel Osteen or Joyce Meyer. There are certainly clergy, theologians, and intellectuals at work in the mainline traditions who are well-loved and respected, but they are less familiar to wider publics outside their denominations.

A popular and common set of talking points, which Lantzer calls the “decline thesis,” has become nearly ubiquitous in explanations for this loss of centrality. This argument rests on several key assumptions of mainline denominations, chiefly about their “liberal” tendencies (though, as we have seen, plenty of mainliners do not identify in this way). In *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen – among the founding leaders of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which broke away in 1936 from the Presbyterian denomination from which the PCUSA

has descended – accuses “liberalism” in the Church of eroding the very core of Christian doctrine (2009:15). Such religion, he argues, is “non-redemptive,” and has traded doctrine for sentiment. It appropriates the language of Christianity, though it is not in itself worthy of the title of “Christian.” Machen made these arguments when modernist groups were in ascendency, and long before membership began to wane, but the decline thesis contains a similar critique of mainline denominations as “liberal” and ineffective. Mainline denominations are guilty of engaging in too much cultural conformity, tampering with beliefs and positions that have been deemed too offensive or irrelevant. In pursuing an ameliorated American society and privileging what George Marsden (2006:176) calls “The use of scientific, historical, and social method in understanding and applying evangelical Christianity to the needs of living persons,” engagement with the secular world became much less about processes of evangelism or conversion.

It is said that to make worship and membership more appealing within congregations, to be accommodating, and to cultivate environments that would be more applicable or relevant to groups of people from a wider set of backgrounds, denominations have become too focused being “politically correct” or noncommittal (Kelley 1972, Reeves 1996, Shiflett 2005). As a result, the argument goes, these denominations are thus too comfortable engaging in worldliness, rather than with being set apart as an example of transcendent godliness and righteousness. Dean M. Kelley analyzed mainline decline in a 1972 study commissioned by the National Council of Churches, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*. Kelley argued that the mainline denominations have built a reputation for being “reasonable” or “sociable.” They are less successful or effective than their more conservative Christian counterparts precisely because they are afraid to force any clear doctrinal or behavioral requirements on their members (1972:26,72).

More recently, in *When God Talks Back: Understanding the Evangelical Relationship with God*, Tanya Luhrmann describes how mainliners' inability to perceive God as saliently, intimately, and supernaturally present in the lives of worshippers makes it easier for them to take God for granted. But this comes at their own institutional peril. Luhrmann writes, "...the liberal Christian God has failed. The mainstream churches are often empty now, their pews unfilled, their hymns unsung, while the churches of the supernatural God blaze with life. For many Americans...understanding God in a despiritualized way just doesn't keep them in their seats on Sunday morning" (2012:312). Luhrmann's argument that mainline churches do not "blaze" bears a striking resemblance to witnessing from young Evangelical Rachel Elhardt in the 2006 Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady film *Jesus Camp*, a documentary about an annual gathering of Kids on Fire School of Ministry camp in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Rachel says, "God is not in every church. There is such a thing...they're called 'dead churches.' And the people there, they sit there like this." Rachel then shifts into a rigid, stoic sitting position, murmuring in a low voice, "We worship you, God. We worship you, God." She continues,

They sing like three songs, then they listen to a sermon. Churches that God likes to go to are churches where they're jumping up and down, shouting His name, and just praising Him. They're not acting, they're not, 'We worship you.' They're "HALLELUJAH GOD." [here she leaps to her feet and shakes her fist] And, you know...and depending on how they invite Him, He'll be there or not.

Rachel mentions that some churches are "dead," echoing Durkheim's prediction for religious groups that no longer inspire zeal. The "dead church" is a popular label many conservative Protestants apply to institutions which allegedly do not inspire divine presence in their worship – they become "dead," "deceased," or "dying" churches which God abandons. This references John's words to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1: "I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead." Motifs of death proliferate the myriad books and guides written in the past decade for reversing the effects of decline at the local congregational level, with such

titles as *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (2014) and *Anatomy of a Revived Church: Seven Findings on How Congregations Avoided Death* (2019), both by Thom S. Rainer, a former CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources (which has connections to the Southern Baptist Convention). Such guides do not necessarily apply only to mainline churches, but long-established congregations of the mainline traditions are often the institutions most associated with “sickness” or requiring “autopsy” (Rainer 2014:4-6).

Many of those who apply the death metaphor to mainline churches occupy an “outsider” position, in that they are not actively practicing within a mainline denomination. But mainliners, too, sometimes use death motifs in describing particular congregations, even if the explanations given for a church’s demise do not always align with reasonings put forward in the decline thesis. For example, at Second Presbyterian, a pastoral intern named Luke told me in an interview,

The church I grew up in is the very very definition of “God’s frozen chosen.” Oh my God, it’s frightening and very sad. They made up their minds that they aren’t going to change for anyone. They will welcome you in as long as you conform to their form of worship. You want to say their prayers, say their creeds, do what they do, and don’t try to change things, because then they will send you away. And consequently they are in the process of dying, they’re down to eight active members. It’s tragic and sad but they made their decisions, now they have to live with them.

Luke explained that he had some hurtful experiences with the church in the past which led to his harsh analysis of it. But he also made an explicit connection between the PCUSA church where he grew up and a “dying” church. By “frozen chosen,” he is referencing an epithet about Protestants from Calvinist traditions, referring to both quiet and reserved mannerisms (frozen) and the Reformed doctrine of election (chosen). The point at which Luke’s analysis differs from the decline thesis is that he locates the dying in the congregation’s vehement refusal to “change” and willingness to lose members who will not “do what they do.” Proponents of the decline thesis, instead, will often critique the mainline for being far too open to change, diluting notions

of faith and the tangible presence and intervention of the divine far too often and aggressively. Mainline congregations become ineffective and unattractive to participants, in the process dooming their institutions to irrelevance and placing their souls in danger from God's eventual judgement.

Proponents of the decline thesis continue that faithful Christians both need and intrinsically prefer churches which will demand adherence to "traditional" Protestant values and theology, rather than remaining among groups which are so willing to belittle or forgo any sense of orthodoxy to tenets of Christianity. The tenets in question often align closely with Lyman and Milton Stewart's *The Fundamentals* pamphlets of 1910, which decry "liberal" theological interventions, and affirm beliefs in the virgin birth and divinity of Christ, the authority of scripture, the Second Coming, and the means of personal salvation (Balmer 2006). While not included in these pamphlets, in more contemporary debates, the fundamental "values" to which members should conform also often include strong anti-LGBTQ+ positions that are framed as "biblical." These include excluding LGBTQ+ people from full church participation and limiting LGBTQ+ civil rights and protections in secular contexts. A decline thesis argues that because the mainline denominations have spurned such requirements for their parishioners, members have left mainline churches like passengers on a rapidly sinking ocean liner, clamoring for space in the lifeboats. Those who leave desire for their souls to be "fed" in a spiritual sense, and are finding no nourishment. When visitors do not return, budgets fall short, and churches close, the thesis concludes, mainline leaders have no one to blame but themselves for the results of their ineffectual bureaucracies, procedures, practices, and beliefs.

Proponents of such arguments recognize that though membership and attendance have dropped in mainline churches, there are still parishioners who loyally worship in them every

Sunday, give offerings of money and time, and show concern for their churches. But explanations for these remaining congregants can be simplistic, reductive, and often insulting. Those who stay, such arguments generally go, recognize their churches are ineffective, but are just too stubborn to leave. Perhaps they are elderly, and feel they are too old to relocate. Or they are just passive to the fates of their churches and are awaiting inevitable closure. If the ocean liner is sinking, they have ordered another drink and settled into the nearest deck chair to listen to the band play “Nearer, My God to Thee.” A few, such reasonings conclude, are simply ignorant of what is coming. A common thread in these explanations is that they cast parishioners as naïve or insincere, and downplay or overlook the actions of congregants who find purpose in their congregations and are acting proactively. Instead, in presenting mainliners as oblivious that their churches are “dying,” they deny agency to all mainliners, especially those who possess marginalized identities.

Too much emphasis on arguments like the decline thesis works to minimize the contributions and agencies of mainliners and does not consider the ways mainliners understand and describe their own participation within their institutions. The activities and the understandings of membership within many mainline congregations directly challenge basic assumptions anchoring a decline thesis, since parishioners are far from passive or aloof regarding the future of their churches or their membership within them. Rather, members acknowledge uncertainty and anxiety about the future, but spend a great deal more time sharing moments of joy, growth, hope, and collaboration. As Diana Eck notes of scholarly understanding of religion in the twenty-first century, “We are far more aware of the forces of violence that tear communities apart than we are of those practices and movements that knit them together” (2007:745). While Eck refers here to a scholarly and popular focus on violent acts and a lack of

attention to subsequent moments of religious pluralism, her point also holds for common perspectives on mainline church dynamics more specifically. In analyses of mainline decline, the emphasis tends to be put on those who depart in acrimonious ways. Moments of harmony and synergy can seem unremarkable, if they are noticed at all.

5.3 LGBTQ+ Christians Building Community

When Pastor Camille and the Second Presbyterian session asked me to lead my own “Courageous Conversation” on the history of queer folks and Christian institutions, I asked the audience, made mostly up of church members, what it would mean for them for Christian and LGBTQ+ identities to intersect – “What would you hope for it to look like?” Of the audience members who responded, most either shared that they identified as LGBTQ+ or were in an LGBTQ+ individual’s immediate family, usually a parent or sibling. Broadly, they hoped it would mean that LGBTQ+ people felt less confined in the ways they practiced Christianity. That engagement with the faith would not be limited to digital spaces like blogs or Twitter, or to more civic contexts of lobbying, activism, and pro-equality litigation. That participation in fellowship could happen in more mainstream Christian spaces, rather than just in separate churches or denominations like the MCC that are majority or entirely-LGBTQ+. That LGBTQ+ religious practice would not remain constrained to private devotion with no institutional affiliation. That queer folks who had been spurned or turned away from a church would not give up hope. That they could be associated with qualities or identities apart from queerness, if they wished. While audience members certainly did not speak on behalf of their entire congregation, they nonetheless voiced an aspiration for equal participation by LGBTQ+ people within the Church at large.

In most mainline denominations, these aspirations are well on their way to becoming reality, in keeping with Kathleen Talvacchia's argument about queer people in Christianity in general:

Queer folks have found Christian traditions not only hospitable to queer lives but in deep ways congruent with them. Theory and theology are only just catching up with the fact that queer Christians for a long time have been quietly constructing new identities, articulating new understandings of faith, and creating new religious communities (2014:1).

Likewise, my fieldwork gave a strong sense that what these scholars call "queer Christian life" is not an aspiration which may occur one day, but an active reality with a lengthy history (Talvacchia 2014:4). Beyond membership and participation as regular laity in mainline churches, queer Christians are increasingly able to find opportunities in (most) mainline denominations to serve openly in roles with more institutional power: as ordained clergy, church staff, Sunday School teachers and leaders, delegates at regional and national assemblies, and elected administrators. Two milestones serve as helpful examples of this shift on the national level in mainline denominations. In 2004, The Right Reverend Gene Robinson became bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, the first openly gay consecrated bishop in a major Christian denomination (Nunley 2004). In 2021, the Reverend Megan Rohrer, who had already become the first openly transgender minister in a prominent mainline denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 2006, was elected bishop of the ELCA's Sierra Pacific Synod. Rohrer became the first openly transgender bishop in any major U.S. Christian body (Andrew 2021). Both bishops served in their positions amid significant controversy and criticism – Rohrer resigned in 2022 after receiving backlash over the removal of a pastor – but both found a great deal of denominational support for their respective elections, despite being targets of harassment. The 2012 National Congregations Survey, conducted by researchers from Duke University and the University of Chicago, found that Christian churches

showed a significant uptick in acceptance of allowing gay and lesbian couples to become full members (an increase of 37 and 48 percent of respondents from 2006 to 2012) and allowing gays and lesbians to assume voluntary leadership positions (an increase of 18 to 26 percent over the same timeline) (Masci 2014, National Congregations Study 2022).

The increased visibility and access to power which queer people have is also present at the local level. At Second Presbyterian, Luke was working to be a Commissioned Lay Pastor (CLP) in the PCUSA. He has a zeal for preaching and an extensive collection of beautiful earrings, both of which he brought to the pulpit. While CLPs are not authorized outside their presbytery since each presbytery manages their own commissioning process, they are able to preach, moderate a session, baptize, preside over marriage ceremonies, and administer the Lord's Supper. CLPs often work in small congregations which are unable to find a full-time pastor. Luke's ultimate plan was to serve as CLP for a nearby church where members of his family attended. "They've been using pulpit supply ministers week to week for years; they're not looking [for a full-time pastor]." As part of his training, he completed an internship at Second Presbyterian, and he was a beloved addition to the congregation. Over and over again in interviews and conversations parishioners would stress how much Luke had brought to the congregation and how they would be devastated to see him move on to another church. He was so incredibly loved and treasured. Often wearing a bright rainbow-patterned stole over his robes, Luke was very open about the connections he perceived between his call to the work of ministry and his identity as a gay man. Luke told me in an interview,

There was a brief stint in a Metropolitan Community Church in Dallas, but then I came back to Michigan, and I've been Presbyterian pretty much my entire life. I started the process [to be CLP], the Presbyter for Common Life gave me a list of ministers in the presbytery I could work with as a mentor. And on that list was Camille, and I immediately locked in, and sent her an email asking, "Would you consider being my mentor?" And she asked questions of the presbytery, what was involved and what was

expected. Apparently, they answered her questions correctly because she went to her session, the session here. And said, “Would you agree to have Luke here as an intern for a year?” And apparently, they said unanimously yes. I have assisted Camille in almost every worship service, I’ve preached three times, I have sat in on every session meeting since I’ve been here, as well as the deacon meetings and several committee meetings. I have participated in Courageous Conversations. Camille has helped me start a prayer shawl ministry, and has asked me to help with a scripture presentation team to work with a group of people to creatively present scripture on Sunday mornings. I’m helping coordinate the presbytery meeting this Fall, which will be here. Then I don’t have to drive somewhere...I was blown away the first service I had here. I was completely destroyed. I’d never seen church quite like this before in a Presbyterian church. The sanctuary all singing “Holy, Holy, Holy!” I was in tears. I was literally wiping tears away. One of the ladies in the choir patted me on the shoulder and said “It will be okay!” And Camille whispered to me, “Sweetheart, if you’re this messed up on the first hymn, you’d better fasten your seatbelt—it’s going to be a very bumpy ride!”

Luke initially found himself involved in the MCC, but wanted to return to a tradition with which he was more familiar. In the context of friendlier mainline environments, LGBTQ+ Christians like Luke can more easily make these shifts into mainline churches and become involved at all administrative levels. Like Luke found so much meaning in his first service and began to cry during the first hymn, the spiritual engagement of LGBTQ+ members can be powerful and moving. In many cases, this is because, the kinds of circumstances like Luke’s overwhelming acceptance as a CLP candidate by the session would have been impossible a decade beforehand. Even a few years before, before the schism, he would have met with extreme backlash and the likely ire of an anti-queer pastor.

Newly active LGBTQ+ members of churches number in the thousands, yet Robertson argues that most Christians are either unaware of this trend or deny it, due to the notion that faithful LGBTQ+ Christians contradict their theological paradigms. A significant reason for this sort of lack of awareness in the three churches where I worked, however, is not due to denial, but rather to attention being directed at the distinct lack of growth in other areas and demographics. The specter of decline often distracts members from their other ambitions for the future of their

institutions. With fears about membership, finances, and weekly attendance being so commonplace, queer parishioners sometimes found it difficult to focus on queer inclusion as a priority, much less to demand such a focus from their non-queer pew mates. While “How can we do better in welcoming LGBTQ+ people” was certainly a question I heard asked in meetings, visioning sessions, and prayer circles, it was one query in a cacophony of others: “How can we get more young families in the church, with children to fill a youth group?” “We cut down on our cleaning budget to save some money, but now the floors of the office starting to look really dirty, aren’t they?” “The roof should really be entirely replaced, or the leaks will get worse. Should we use our savings for that, or should we launch a capital campaign?” “Didn’t we do a capital campaign for the wheelchair ramp last year?”

While such anxieties caused some parishioners to be limit the kinds of welcoming practices they afforded to LGBTQ+ visitors and new members, among others, decline was the impetus for welcoming LGBTQ+ parishioners. Rather than considering LGBTQ+ inclusion *in spite of* anxieties over the future, some members found a strong sense of purpose in cultivating a hearty welcome *for the sake of the future*. This point often becomes weaponized by more conservative Protestant groups as a critique of mainline institutions, that a push for LGBTQ+ inclusion is further proof of the popular decline thesis. Mainline churches are twisting their moral positions to appease “worldly” propensities of American society, and will do everything possible to save themselves from insolvency and closure. This venture, the thesis seems to suggest, will ultimately fail, given its repudiation of a “traditional” Protestant orthodoxy that is decidedly anti-queer. When I heard this position of the potential LGBTQ+ people have to grow congregations, it was not primarily framed as a coping or survival mechanism. But it was mentioned as something that could “help” churches stabilize. That framing was especially

prevalent among the growing numbers of queer members in each church who had been attending and participating for several years. LGBTQ+ members did much of the labor of implementing inclusive actions on any given Sunday morning and were aware through their own friendships and networks of the general uptick in practicing LGBTQ+ Christians. They were therefore able to tell their non-queer counterparts that extravagantly welcoming LGBTQ+ people was a chance to proactively resist a sense of decline. Ensuring that marginalized people could comfortably inhabit long-term as members could provide some level of reinvigoration to the congregations, one which members would not want to miss.

In this milieu, queer church members are working to discern what it means to be an LGBTQ+ Christian in their own religious lives, and then how to embody it in their engagement with their church. There is a great deal of both immediacy and nuance in answering the question about how these identities interact, and responses unsurprisingly differed among those I asked. Queer congregants framed their answers in terms of their own personal relationship with the varied religious institutions in which they had participated or had been denied participation, the types of marginalization they had faced, and the welcomes they had eventually found. Answers among the LGBTQ+ congregants I interviewed, however, had some clear patterns. LGBTQ+-identified congregants made clear that they were agents in their own inclusion. They did not see themselves as passive in the process of welcoming. Nor did they see themselves or want to be portrayed as docile victims of mistreatment, timidly waiting for gatekeepers to let them in to the Church. This fits into the work of scholars of queer populations in rural areas like Bernadette Barton (2012) or Mary L. Gray (2009). Both scholars note that people from progressive areas of the United States often presume queer victimhood among people from less-progressive areas, especially rural regions of traditionally “Red” states.

Michigan has a vibrant queer history, in no small part due to the pioneering work of queer Michiganders like Ruth Ellis or Jim Toy, who was very active in the Episcopal Church and was made a canon in the Diocese of Michigan (Michigan Radio 2020, Stein 2022). Toy was actively involved in Michiganders for Justice up until his death in 2022, and in addition to the many wonderful conversations I had with him, he was a tireless advocate for churches having tough but needed conversations about how to welcome those on the margins of the LGBTQ+ community. He always called it the “TBLG community” to prioritize transgender individuals. In spite of this vibrancy, queer congregants in the three churches where I worked described how because they were not connected to large urban centers on the east or west coasts of the United States, people might assume that they could contribute less to conversations about equality. Some had lived in larger urban centers like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco earlier in their lives, but they had returned to the Michigan communities where they had spent their childhood and youth. Because they had chosen to come back to more rural areas and belong to small, local congregations, it might be tempting to see their actions— advocacy for welcoming designations, contributions to Bible studies and other small groups, and other forms of participation in church activities and rituals – as less impactful.

Such actions have even been comprehended as defensive tactics or means of protection from further marginalization. Too occupied fighting an onslaught of homophobic and transphobic vitriol, the only stories they will have to share are of abuse, rejection, and heartache. LGBTQ+ congregants certainly told me of many of these hardships, which were numerous and varied. In fact, the acts of physical and emotional abuse which congregants detailed as a result of anti-queer prejudice were often coupled with stories tepid or cold responses from people and institutions. While making claims to altruism, acceptance, or even unconditional love, these

supposed “allies” in family groups and faith communities would only continue patterns of mistreatment. For some, these traumas were so great that they remained in the closet. Others remained in the closet, not because they felt they would be treated badly by their fellow congregants, but because it was not something they wished to share. But the stories also always involved their agency, and their searches for reconciliation, celebration, and community. Applying bell hooks’ (1989) concept of “talking back” as an act of resistance to oppression, Barton notes that because rural queer folks are “on the front lines of the culture wars in the United States,” they furnish invaluable insights gained from their hard time in the trenches (2012:20).

While working to discern what it means to be LGBTQ+ Christians, queer folks in small Michigan communities inhabit some of the very trenches Barton describes. As such, they too have essential insights to offer. Their goals in seeking welcoming churches are not only discernment for themselves, and fellowship with other congregants, but to provide religious institutions, advocates, activists, and non-religious queer folks with their experiences on how to make more inclusive environments. These insights range from strategies for interacting with conservative Christians to procedures on how to be active participants in the struggle for liberation and affirmation with a firm grounding in Christian theology. Their stories of interactions with the Church are not just of maltreatment but also of joy and restoration, stories from which others can learn. Their presence in the congregations, they argue, serve as a testament to their own persistence and resolve in demanding a place within the Body of Christ. Their many forms of participation are a display of queer agency, both through an active reclaiming of a commitment to spirituality and through an embrace of church traditions. Participation has real, physical, tangible consequences of queer religiosity in the lives of queer

parishioners. While, increasingly, individual queer congregants do not have to fight to lay claim to membership in a mainline church, they continue to reaffirm that they belong there every Sunday morning. This visible participation affects how others see LGBTQ+ parishioners and how they see themselves. It gives us a glimpse into the work queer people of faith undertake to discern and clarify what being an LGBTQ+ Christian actually means. Through this discernment, often on the personal level through devotion, study, and interaction with fellow congregants, members can interrogate how to exist within congregations. They can also prepare to deal with problems their churches may face, for while the welcome is sincere, the stability of the institution itself over the decade to come is not always guaranteed.

Alongside the push by parishioners to embrace LGBTQ+ inclusion in congregations which subsequently make *de facto* (St. Michael's, Second Presbyterian) or *de jure* (Nazareth) commitments to affirming the lives and spirituality of queer folks, a claim to queerness and a claim to being a child of God within the Body of Christ are not mutually exclusive. It became important for me to ask queer Christians in the congregations how they understand the mixing of their queerness with their (in many cases newfound or greatly expanded) institutional access to the sacred? In regularly attending one of the three churches, and joining as members, LGBTQ+ congregants overwhelmingly described themselves as thoroughly active participants who make major contributions to their congregations, financially and through service. Despite their differing circumstances, many contrasted the tone of harmful or damaging previous experiences by framing their current participation in church as an act of resilience to past trauma, having found a space where their whole selves were welcome and where they might heal and be healed.

For an illustration of how queer people navigate their congregations and find purpose in their belonging, we can turn to Terri. Terri is the epitome of an active church member. She

attends a majority of the church's events throughout the year, has a spot on several church committees, and gleefully worships almost every week. On Sundays, she is often serving as a greeter at the front doors, shaking hands and handing out bulletins. With a flair for photography and social media, it is commonplace to see Terri at both worship services and congregational activities, making sure someone with a camera takes pictures of special moments during the events. She usually does so herself, using her smartphone or large digital camera. When you hear the camera's loud click, you know Terri is nearby, capturing something joyful on film. She makes sure these photos are posted to the church's Facebook account and website. Thus, she has been responsible for documenting many of the church's public moments and making them available for others to see. In her interview, Terri spoke to me about her role in the church, and why her tasks of taking photos and serving as a greeter are the most rewarding aspects of participation for her:

I think hospitality is pretty much my middle name. I am a person who constantly needs to make sure everybody's doing fine. I want everybody to be happy. I want everybody to feel warm and welcome. A lot of people that need to please people, that can come from many things, and it can come from a lot of hurt and bad things that happened, sometimes in childhood.

Terri told me about a string of strained relationships she had faced early in her life as she navigated her bisexual identity, which she felt served as the impetus for the hospitable and welcoming behavior she displays. Terri did not feel that her congregation had an expectation that she would act in a certain way when she joined. She also stressed that she did not believe she encountered any pressure to disclose her sexual orientation, adding "I certainly didn't feel any pressure to tell my story." She acknowledged, however, that since she did not attend services or events with a partner, her sexual orientation was far less overt than her congregation's other

LGBTQ+ members, so she would not be the obvious choice among church leaders to give a testimony or serve on an LGBTQ+ advocacy group. If she was approached, she thought it would be for her reputation of having a warm and friendly demeanor towards new members and visitors, and not because she occasionally dated other women.

Another congregant who saw himself as actively contributing greatly to his church was Benny, who was a relatively new member of his congregation. He proudly told me that he had jumped head-first into a variety of activities at the church soon after his first visit. From then on, he had been fully supported by church leadership and by his fellow congregants even though he was gay. He made clear that his intention in finding a church was not to limit himself to attending services and singing hymns from his pew. So, prior to beginning regular attendance, he proactively made an appointment with the pastor; he wanted to first gauge whether an openly gay man could participate fully. He shared with the pastor that he previously had a deeply troubling experience with a much larger, nondenominational church, which he had begun to attend regularly after a recommendation from a friend he worked with.

I've never been too wild about what I call "the big church." No one ever said hi, or talked to me, or anything. I felt like, what's wrong? I don't wear the great big rainbow flag on my head, you know. So I was thinking about becoming a member, but I never got a call back from the assistant pastor. When I finally talked to him, he looked at me and he said, "Well, you can't get married here!" I'm like, "I didn't ask you that." He goes, "You won't be able to serve on any committees or serve in any capacity because of your lifestyle." He assumed I was a gay person. I said "So you're telling me, you'll openly discriminate against me because of my lifestyle, but you'll take my money? That ain't gonna work." I never went back. I'd go to their Christmas pageant, that's about it.

By contrast, Benny is thrilled to have become a member in a place where he has been able to have “a stronger voice.” He has joined one of the church committees, volunteers at several events, and coordinates funding for the church’s CROP Walk team, a community wide event that takes place in neighborhoods across the U.S. and focuses on fundraising to alleviate hunger and poverty.

I don’t think there’ll ever be a gay parade in town, but when I did come I was welcomed with open arms, and I’m becoming more active in the church. It’s comfortable, it’s welcoming. I haven’t felt any conflict with anybody regarding my sexuality or who I am.... I can walk into the church, and if I were to bring somebody with me, we wouldn’t be whispered about.

Benny hopes to continue contributing to the church by organizing more events that will strengthen the presence of fellow gays and lesbians in the congregation and community. Belonging to the church has provided him with a familial atmosphere and a feeling of not being alone.

At times, queer parishioners spoke about the reactions of their LGBTQ+ friends with secular, agnostic, or atheist orientations, who were often suspicious of participating in Christian institutions which have been known to systemically harm marginalized people, even if the mainline denominations were working to reckon with some of these harms. As Jasmine Zine argues of a mutual distrust that often occurs between secular liberal and faith-based feminists, members of the former group can often assume that those who count themselves part of the latter will collude in and frame their identities through religious institutions, which in turn espouse patriarchy, white supremacy, sexism, and classism (2004:171-173). Similarly, queer congregants relayed to me that many in their wider LGBTQ+ networks feared that regular participation in a church not only constituted a lack of agency, but also complicity (or even active collaboration) in

the marginalization of LGBTQ+ Americans. For example, a gay member named Richie talked to me about navigating tension around talking to his friends about his love of his church. While being part of a church had always been part of his life, even after he came out, he noted it could make for some awkward conversations.

In the LGBT community I can get a lot of weird looks. Like when I go on a date, and ask me what I'm doing on Sunday, and I say I'll be at church, and they're like [he gives a look combining terror and confusion] "Ok? So you're a gay man who goes to church? Um...ok. No second date for me."

Richie noted that some of these encounters probably happened out of genuine confusion or surprise about his church membership. Others had made him feel like he wasn't perceived to have a vested interest in LGBTQ+ rights. Some people felt, he assumed, that he cared more for an institution than his fellow queer people. LGBTQ+ Christians risk being faulted for possessing a false consciousness, which Zine defines as "lack[ing] the political maturity to understand, articulate, and combat the nexus of oppressions they face" (2004:173). Such a critique mirrors the criticism of mainliners who remain in shrinking churches as simply lacking awareness of their precarious position and how to extract themselves from it. In this case, the argument LGBTQ+ churchgoers potentially hear from non-religious friends or partners is that they are subjecting themselves to scrutiny or humiliation by a congregation that will never fully accept them, no matter what they do. Their queerness makes them simply incompatible with the kind of institutional Christianity they pursue. By refusing to emancipate themselves from those institutions, they condemn future LGBTQ+ people to similar poor treatment. Navigating being LGBTQ+ and Christian therefore can mean traversing accusations by other queer people or non-religious queer allies of relinquishing autonomy and being apologists on behalf of religious discrimination against queer people. Withstanding such accusations involves LGBTQ+

Christians recognizing their agency in contributing to their churches is something more complicated and more beautiful than what it might potentially be reduced to by those who might very well have suffered exclusions, indignities, and harms which substantiate their critical perspective.

While non-queer members take part in debates over mainline churches' policies and roles in welcoming hitherto-marginalized folks, the role of discerning the parameters and characteristics of queer agency within the churches is decidedly not the purview of non-queer congregants. An overwhelming majority of the non-queer church members (those who identified as heterosexual and cisgender) who were vocally supportive of inclusion respected this role being in the hands of their LGBTQ+ pew-mates. When asked, however, most expressed that they believed that LGBTQ+ Christians should, for all practical purposes, be treated no differently from themselves. Since God has created LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people alike and loves them equally, they reasoned, there is and should be no discernable difference in the kinds of expectations other church members should have for them. LGBTQ+ members should attend events, participate in discussions, and give weekly or monthly offerings like any other member. A few congregants brought more nuance to this question, noting that they were not aware of unique expectations LGBTQ+ Christians might feel they are subjected to as part of a congregation. Jared of St. Michael's, for example, stressed that because he did not identify as LGBTQ+, he could not in good conscience speculate what it might mean to be a queer Christian. He could make conjectures on the challenges he assumed would be faced, but could only speak from his own experience as a heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle-class father of young children. Jared wanted to make sure that his views and expectations did not conflict with

LGBTQ+ perspectives. He admitted, however, that he was willing to give the general impression that he got over years of especially close friendship with two LGBTQ+ church members:

I'm going to state some facts I can see. They are leaders here. Official roles. They're regular members, they're contributing members. They have good relationships with people. They don't seem to suffer in any of their church relationships that I know of. They have formed some very deep meaningful relationships with certain people, including my family. For them to feel comfortable enough here to do those kinds of things, and leading...there's a certain vulnerability to leadership. I see them trusting us and loving us, so that tells me that they feel welcome here.

Jared's answer is notable because rather than listing expectations for how the two members in question will participate in church life, he instead notes the kinds of contributions he has witnessed them make to St. Michael's, from serving in the church's leadership, to caring for ill or older members, to giving money.

Jared framed his answer around whether the wider congregation was providing a welcoming setting, so that LGBTQ+ members would feel safe and empowered to participate, rather than giving a set of expectations for LGBTQ+ members to meet. This kind of response mirrored that of many of the churches' most-vocally affirming non-queer members, who asserted that LGBTQ+ parishioners should discern for themselves how they want to participate in church life. While incredibly active in terms of making sure church policies and congregational attitudes allow an environment where LGBTQ+ members can participate, these members are generally quite passive when it comes to discerning how LGBTQ+ people involve themselves in the institutions. They support inclusion, and will fight for it, but will not contribute to expectations for how LGBTQ+ members should "properly" function in church-related duties.

LGBTQ+ members show a kind of agency where they feel like less of a marked category of person when claiming space within the Church, while also displaying a deep respect and reverence for Christian beliefs and practices. Terri's and Benny's experiences in their churches both exemplify this agency. Benny's current church membership is fulfilling for him because there is no longer the kind of disconnect he encountered at his previous church, where he felt his money would be accepted but his service would be rejected. He can engage freely, but participation in committee membership and leadership in events like the CROP walk envelop him in activities and procedures which were already present before he joined. Similarly, Terri is not acting in resistance to church activities as they currently exist. She instead wants (and has) the freedom to document the church's activities so that congregants can fully appreciate their labor, and so the work the church is doing can be better advertised on social media. This is so these activities can keep happening. While they are not dismantling the congregational structure into which these events, projects, and goals are built, they contest the oppression Christian institutions are capable of perpetuating through their presence and participation as LGBTQ+ people. This exploration of how to be part of a church community and how to make that community safer and more life-giving for other LGBTQ+ people is a characteristic of the mainline denominations that many LGBTQ+ Christians treasure. There are growing opportunities for agency in mainline congregations for queer members to think about and embody their relationship with an institution – whether that relationship is newfound or rekindled – and to consider how laying claim as equally-participating member can itself be an emancipatory act, and one that other LGBTQ+ Christians can continue to do, thanks to their efforts.

5.4 Opportunities for Service and Outreach

Participation takes many forms in a church community, but one of the most dynamic aspects of congregation life in which members felt a strong sense of purpose – and in which queer parishioners had an opportunity to participate, meet other congregants, and deepen relationships – were chances to “get their hands dirty.” These opportunities usually took the form of outreach and public service projects. Each church formed several formalized groups or teams throughout the year for service work. Those teams participated in on behalf of the wider membership, often wearing T-shirts or hats with the church logo. The teams were funded by a combination of the church’s yearly budget and fundraising efforts. Members participated in or contributed to these efforts in large numbers. Each person looked forward to being a part of making the projects work efficiently, even if their assistance was limited to monetary donations or prayers for success. They explained to me that this work comprised both an important aspect of why they loved their church, and an example of how they felt service should be key to living a Christian life. As far as advertisement or instruction to participants, at no point in any of these service opportunities was the intent to potentially court new members or draw visitors to the church, “witness,” or solicit any kind of financial support for the church. Church leaders openly discouraged any inclinations toward exploiting service opportunities for such purposes, sometimes very sternly. They stressed that the goal was not to grow the church, or even make the church appear benevolent to outsiders. Gaining new people in the pews was not the point. Nor was “winning souls” In this way, service activities were contrasted with foreign or domestic mission trips that team members had gone on as part of other churches’ programming, or had friends or family participate in, which often have explicit goals of conversions.

St. Michael's coordinated with "Faith in Action" a community food pantry and emergency financial service provider. Each Sunday, a cardboard box with the organization's name was placed near the double doors of the sanctuary in which congregants could donate items throughout the year. Members who managed the box also volunteered at the food pantry, stocking shelves or assisting community members with transportation to and from the Faith in Action building. Nazareth coordinated with their own local food pantry and a local homeless shelter, but their primary service opportunity was an annual trip to the city of Flint to work with Habitat for Humanity. Every June, a team of about ten people worked on construction and maintenance projects and the whole congregation participated through raising funds for the team's lodging and travel. Members who were unable to join the team could give money privately or could attend an annual fundraising taco lunch and cake auction in Nazareth's social hall that the church youth group organized, a month before the trip.

Second Presbyterian, like the other two churches, worked with their local food pantry, but also had a churchwide service project every June called "Invisible City." This community-wide initiative, led by a core team at Second Presbyterian, recruited around one hundred congregants and members of the local ELCA and UMC churches for three days of job site work. The mission was to work with community members who were "unseen" in society: elderly people, those with chronic health issues, and low-income residents of the county. Teams of five or six people spread out across the county and did yard work, cleaning, and maintenance at the homes of these community members regardless of whether they attended a church or not. Congregants prepared food for the job site workers and a group drove to several local nursing homes to sing for and visit with residents. When I arrived at 7:45 a.m. at the church's gathering space to register for my work in Invisible City, I found the church abuzz. Tarps laid on the floor full of tools that people

could take to their job sites depending on what they had to do. Kurtis, the husband of Pastor Camille and coordinator of Invisible City, was giving the waivers to folks who were coming in for the first time, which ensured that they would not hold the church liable for injury during work. Signing my waiver, I went to the social hall, where a kitchen crew were starting to lay out a breakfast of bagels, fruit, yogurt, and leftover pizza from the previous workday. I was assigned to a work team led by a mechanical worker, Carl, and rode along with him in his truck which towed large trailer full of yard equipment: trash cans, tree-trimming tools, a weed whacker, and gasoline. The other four members of our team would drive separately in their own cars. At around 8:30, Pastor Camille and Kurtis began making announcements to the room, which started with Pastor Camille reading a devotional poem based on Romans. Camille instructed us to remember that by doing this service, we were not trying to bring new people to the church. “We are not taking the light of God into any of the places we are going. The light of God is already there.” She also noted that we should do our best to refrain from judging any of the homeowners if we saw poverty to which we were not accustomed. Instead, we were to “acknowledge that factors specific to that person’s situation have contributed to what we were seeing. We do not have intimate knowledge of those factors.” A choir member led us in an acapella version of the 1982 Kelly Willard hymn “Make Me a Servant,” printed on another handout on the tables.

Make me a servant, humble and meek.

Lord, let me lift up those who are weak,

And may the prayer of my heart always be:

Make me a servant,

Make me a servant,

Make me a servant today!

As we left the building, Kurtis waved and shouted after us, “It’s all about the homeowner!” Our first homeowner’s rural farmhouse was surrounded by thick underbrush. Carl read from a list of chores Kurtis had provided and told the team that the homeowner was confined to a wheelchair and did not leave home often. At the beginning of our three-hour shift, a home healthcare worker came out to us with a map of the property sketched in pencil, marking the flowerbeds or areas around the house which needed to be weeded and cleared of dead brush and poison ivy. Carl smiled and told the healthcare worker “It will be no problem.” When we finished, the homeowner thanked us heartily from a window, and Carl showed before and after pictures of the flowerbeds he had taken on his iPhone. It began to drizzle as we got to our second and final residence, in a trailer park on the opposite side of the city. Animal feces was scattered throughout the yard, and the flowerbeds were full of tangles of weeds. The homeowner greeted us, sitting in a folding lawn chair on her front porch for the duration of the time we were there. She hugged each of us and said, “I thank God for your help. God is good.” As we began weeding, I heard one of the team members hum the melody to “Make Me a Servant” (this very well could have been sarcastic, as we had now been working for several hours). Returning to the church, we found kitchen crew taking crockpots of chili and different kinds of bread to the main hall of the “new wing.” A parishioner who had gone to the different job sites and taken photos of participants working, was making a collage. Participants were eager to find themselves shoveling mulch or cleaning sticks and leaves off a roof, pointing and laughing at pictures of congregants who had gotten especially dirty.

Six openly-LGBTQ+ members of Second Presbyterian participated in Invisible City the day I did. Three worked on teams going from house to house, one worked on the kitchen crew, and two joined the group of participants who went as a group to sing hymns and familiar songs at

the city's nursing homes. They shared laughs and talked raucously at dinner with their fellow congregants at the end of the workday. In this service project, and other forms of community engagement in which the churches engaged, members' participation did not differ in scope or context based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Rather, the aspirations LGBTQ+ members had for community service aligned with the intent of other congregants: to be active in their neighborhoods and do great good on behalf of the church.

There was purpose and urgency in congregants' community engagement which they hoped would show their Christian commitments to charity and service, which demonstrates a kind of devotion mainliners are often accused of lacking. Further, instructions were made to members that comprise "demands" that mainliners also allegedly lack, according to a decline thesis, albeit demands of a different kind. For Invisible City, these included calls to be servants without any practical benefits for the vitality of the church (e.g., new members or visitors, more donations, or notoriety), instructions to refrain from framing the work as "bringing God's light" to a place where it was not present, and the order not to judge the circumstances of homeowners. Such demands may not directly mirror tenets of "The Fundamentals," but scripture heavily factored into framing the project. The devotional the group used prior to a day of work concentrated in the fourteenth chapter of Romans, in which Paul instructs readers in a way that mirrors Camille's and Kurtis' instructions. In addition to the devotion, Pastor Camille read two verses directly from the epistle: "Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hinderance in the way of another" (Romans 14:13) and, "Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Romans 14:19). The instruction to become servants and the use of Willard's hymn references words of Jesus on servanthood, including passages in the gospels of Matthew and Mark: "...but whoever wishes to

become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a servant of all” (Mark 10:43). Queer and non-queer parishioners alike had these requirements and embodied them in their service. Thus, LGBTQ+ parishioners displayed their agency by working to keep their congregations effective in their wider communities, building their congregations’ up, not as hypocritical bodies which flagrantly discriminate, but those which wish to humbly serve for the betterment of the community.

5.5 Quiet Faith

When asked in a 2015 interview with Megyn Kelly whether she was a “villain or heroine” for denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples who had recently won the right to wed nationwide, former Rowan County Kentucky clerk Kim Davis answered, “Just depends if you love God or not, which side I’m on” (Hernandez 2015). Davis framed her opposition to marriage equality in terms of “the Christian faith,” noting that she was compelled under the authority of God to act as she did. Her polarizing declaration that her faith determined her homophobia stands in stark contrast to the behaviors of a vast majority of my interlocutors. They were often reticent to speak openly about whether faith motivates them to engage in inclusive or welcoming behaviors. Some congregants certainly talked about their faith at length with me, but the majority of laity were more restrained. Compared to the much-publicized jailing of Kim Davis for contempt of court – she was subsequently released to Survivor’s “Eye of the Tiger” blaring over loudspeakers and remarks from then-presidential contender Mike Huckabee – the ways in which my interlocutors describe faith in their lives are rarely as headline-grabbing and are often incredibly subtle.

It can be tempting to latch onto this quietness and restraint, connecting it to a decline thesis as a symptom of a larger shortcoming. It could be inferred that the reticence of mainliners

to speak about faith makes it more plausible to doubt the intensity of their religious devotion in comparison to other Christian groups. Without intensity, the argument goes, the project of growing churches will be fruitless. Because many mainliners do not comfortably or frequently speak about their faith, personal belief, or relationship with the divine, any potential members might surmise that there must be little faith to speak about in their churches. They will therefore seek congregations elsewhere more willing to proclaim faith. In *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, evangelical theologian and activist Jim Wallis describes how faith has been “stolen” in the United States by, among other groups, “liberal theologians whose cultural conformity and creedal modernity serve to erode the foundations of historic biblical faith” (2005:4). Wallis argues that this alleged sabotage produces watered-down and secularized Christianity which does not inspire adherents to deepen their faith. It also prevents progressive Christians from making more effective arguments against marginalizing LGBTQ+ people. As Wallis contends, such arguments “should probe more deeply into the theological, biblical, and sacramental issues that are also at stake” (2005:335).

Despite such perceptions that most mainliners eschew, dilute, or somehow fail in their faith and religiosity, the congregants I worked with present a much more nuanced picture of manifesting religious devotion in significant ways. And for queer Christians – who would be likely excluded or harmed in the kinds of Christian groups one might associate with being more vocal, zealous, or demanding – mainliners’ less flashy approaches to faith are decidedly successful, given that it is precisely this approach which creates space for inclusion.

Uncommunicativeness on topics of their religiosity, or unwillingness to frame actions in terms of being “faithful,” is said by critics to necessarily imply an absence of faith, or desire to place “sensitivity” above meaningful engagement with the sacred. But most parishioners I talked to

told me that sensibility in terms of understanding and compassion must accompany engagement with the sacred, not supersede it. Almost every congregant I interviewed noted to me that faith was vital in their lives. It motivated how they lived, even if they did not talk about it frequently.

Jared explained to me,

Some of us are comfortable talking about that and others you really have to dig. Sometimes people feel like “Oh we’re not Christian enough, or we’re not faithful enough, or we’re not on fire for the Lord.” I think the fact that we’re here, the fact we’re doing what we do is steeped in faith, but we’re going to articulate it differently and some of us aren’t really going to be comfortable talking about it very much.

Jared then gave the example of his mother-in-law who attended church with him. “She’ll talk about her faith, but it’s not something we spend a lot of time on. That doesn’t mean she’s not faithful, she’s one of the most faithful strong people I know, but she’s not walking around telling people about it.”

In the lives of LGBTQ+ Christians in mainline congregations, this framing of faith had ramifications for the kinds of welcome they could expect to find from non-queer congregants. As the congregations worked to make their churches as welcoming as possible, in fact, there were widespread anxieties that too much explicit zeal and mentions of faith could associate them (and mainliners in general) with conservative Christian groups which members saw as exclusionary. “Too many of our churches are very judgmental,” a Presbyterian named Holly noted in an interview.

Pick an issue, abortion, LGBT, pick those issues and the Christians that everyone who is not Christian see are very judgmental. People who aren’t brought up in the church, they may think all churches are like this. And to me, any church that would be judgmental on any issue, wouldn’t be one I’d be comfortable with.

Holly added that as a middle-school teacher in a neighboring city, she often hears non-Christian students reduce all of Christianity to its most conservative manifestations, and she wanted to resist those associations whenever she could. When talking about his bad experience at a nondenominational church, Benny also spoke about perceptions of Christians that did not reflect his experience, “I don’t really go by whether or not people ‘talk Christian,’ you know, and part of that’s being turned off by...labeling everything Christian or non-Christian. Not everyone wants to talk like that. I don’t think it’s genuine.”

A local public figure who came up frequently in conversations about the reduction of Christianity to its evangelical or fundamentalist forms was congressman Tim Walberg, who represented most of my interlocutors in the U.S. House of Representatives during my fieldwork. Before serving in the Michigan Legislature and eventually the U.S. Congress, Walberg attended and was later employed by the Moody Bible Institute. Randall Balmer notes that Moody was intended to be among several institutional “islands of refuge” for theologically conservative Protestants when founded in 1886, as it “offered an alternative environment for education of evangelical children apart from the corrupting influences of secular colleges and universities, many of which had recently ‘gone liberal’ and forsaken their conservative religious heritages” (2006:132). Walberg also pastored Union Gospel Church Tipton, Michigan. In 2013, Walberg responded to a federal lawsuit brought against the Jackson County Board of Commissioners which argued that officials ending prayers in their meetings by saying “In the name of Jesus Christ” violated the U.S. Constitution. Walberg said. “I think it’s sad we are afraid of religion...While I will not wear my religion on my sleeve, I will not hide my faith.” He added “I don’t think I should be discriminated against because of my Christian faith so I can’t say ‘in Jesus’ name’” (MLive 2013).

Meanwhile, Walberg received a “0” on the Human Rights Campaign’s congressional scorecard for the 115th U.S. Congress. According to the Campaign, he has voted consistently in a way that undermines and opposes LGBTQ+ equity (Human Rights Campaign 2022). In turn, many of my interlocutors opposed Walberg in various ways. For example, at least two Episcopal members joined a silent protest outside a men-only breakfast at a UMC congregation where Walberg had been invited to speak. Walberg had declined an invitation from St. Michael’s and Mother Sophia to attend a more public town hall meeting held in their social hall. In another example, a Presbyterian member named Paula held a Sunday-afternoon gathering at her home which included special guest Gretchen Driskell. The member explained during the church’s announcements one Sunday that Driskell was running as Walberg’s Democratic opponent in the 2018 congressional election. She felt it was important to invite all interested church members to attend, meet Driskell, and register to vote if they had not already. Paula did not like the correlations between proclamations of faith Walberg made and the adoption of stances that harmed or excluded marginalized groups. Like Paula, taking exclusionary stances was not behavior that most members wanted their own Christian faith to be associated with or reduced to.

Even if professions of faith are muted or oblique, far less vocal, and in some cases silent, mainline congregants assert that their commitment to faith and their sense of caring for an active and vibrant church is, in their estimation, no less genuinely felt or manifested in their everyday actions. In defining for themselves what it means to be Christian, as defining what it means to welcome and include traditionally marginalized people into their institutions, mainliners too can find engagement with God, cultivate \ their personal faith, and love their church. They debate topics of vital importance to their daily lives and the futures of their congregations, with LGBTQ+ inclusion being a prominent example. They also act in ways they believe are Christian,

ensuring that policies translate into actions which give LGBTQ+ parishioners space to thrive. Through sermons, group studies of the Bible or other relevant texts, and personal devotion, they work to discern ways in which they might pursue the most just and equitable relationship with those around them. Through practices of wider community engagement and building relationships with fellow congregants, they discern what it means for them to belong to a institution defined by fellowship. Initial silence or timidity on the topic of faith by mainliners should neither imply a lack of faith or a perceived distant and tenuous relationship with God or Jesus Christ, both of whom are central to so many mainliners' worldviews and belief systems. In working to understand what Christianity is, and how it operates in people's lives, is imperative to listen to what mainliners are saying about their commitments to their institutions, to gain a better understanding of the parameters and nuances of their faith.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 The Building is Closed. The Church is Open.

On World Communion Sunday, several Christian denominations around the globe observe the central Christian rite of sharing bread and wine, mimicking Jesus' last supper with the twelve disciples. While some Christians observe the ritual weekly, and others monthly, participating groups have observed the rite on first Sunday of October in a show of global unity since 1933 (Presbyterian Mission Agency 2022, United Methodist Church 2022). It varies across Christian traditions in title (e.g., the "Lord's Supper," the "Eucharist," "Holy Communion," or simply "Communion") and in the underlying theology surrounding the presence of Christ in the elements. Each of the "Seven Sisters" except the American Baptist Churches USA classifies the supper along with baptism as *sacraments*, defined by the Episcopal Catechism in the BCP as "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (1979:857). *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, a core Reformed confession included in the PCUSA's *Book of Confessions*, defines sacraments as "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world" (2016:181).

Second Presbyterian participated in World Communion Sunday each year, sharing the ancient sacrament as old as Christianity itself. On one of these Sundays in the latter half of the service, Pastor Camille communicated the reverence that was due, smiling at the congregation and encouraged solemnity as they proceeded. "At this time, I'd like us to turn our hearts and

minds to the celebration of the Lord's Supper together. I have with me a big loaf of Italian bread that smells wonderful." After saying a brief prayer, she began the Words of Institution, which uses text from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Pastor Camille quoted some of the scripture verbatim, but also paraphrased and elaborated:

The Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed, he took the bread as he had in so many other table settings, so many other meals. Surrounded by friends, surrounded by strangers who had become friends. And after giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, broken and given for you." He offered it to them, saying, "Take, eat, in remembrance of me."

She lifted the loaf of bread and broke it, the thick crust making a satisfying crack. She then lifted a ceramic chalice filled with red wine, which bore the symbol of the *ichthys*. She continued,

And in the same way he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins." And every time that we come together and we share of this bread and take of this cup, no matter where we are in the worldwide body of Christ, we do it in remembrance of him. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. I invite you now to share in the body and blood of Christ."

The congregation was still, calm, and deliberate as they prepared to partake of the elements. Suddenly, a message flashed across my computer screen, reading "Your internet connection is unstable." The mosaic of small Zoom tiles showing the Second Presbyterian congregants in their living rooms, dining rooms, and porches briefly blurred. Pastor Camille's voice became choppy and metallic while the connection to the videoconferencing call corrected itself. I shifted in my chair and looked over the desk of my apartment. We had been asked in advance to provide our own elements, since the bread and wine Pastor Camille was using could not be distributed to the

congregation. I had in front of me a Triscuit cracker and small glass of apple juice (the closest I had to wine at the time).

“The Building is Closed. The Church is Open. Worship has Moved Online.” Websites and signage of churches across the country displayed this message throughout 2020 and 2021, as they along with countless other houses of worship around the world switched to remote activities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The closure of individual buildings was either done in response to directives from leaders higher up in the denominational hierarchy (like the bishop of and Episcopal diocese), or as a result of an internal decision by congregational administration. Some churches remained open for in-person worship, but they were few in the mainline denominations. National denominational authorities encouraged local churches to move to virtual formats as in-person activities like youth group meetings or choir practices increasingly became linked to outbreaks of the virus (Conger, Healy, and Tompkins 2020). Leadership gatherings, committee meetings, task forces, and small groups were cancelled, postponed, or indefinitely moved to videoconferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet.

Worship services were also conducted virtually. When the daily average of Covid-19 cases was low, pastors and one or two lay worship assistants would sometimes conduct their Zoom worship services from the sanctuary, wearing protective face masks in addition to their robes. On those days, they would livestream their participation as part of the Zoom call. Other clergy chose to tune in from their own homes for their respective services. When the CDC website or the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reported spikes in the region, or increased hospitalizations and deaths from the virus, everyone in the congregations I worked with worshipped from home. The move to virtual worship created new kinds of labor for individual congregants, from setting up the video calls or livestreams to disseminating links and

moderating. During virtual worship, moderators had to be ever-vigilant for spammers or “Zoom-bombers” who accessed the worship link to disrupt the service or harass members. When a congregation did not have a staff member responsible for AV needs, this role was filled by volunteers from the laity.

An embrace of digital worship and interaction that had previously been unfamiliar to most members, especially those who do not regularly use computers or smartphones, meant that certain congregants (mostly older members) could not access the calls. Parishioners who had never missed a Sunday in decades were absent because they lacked a computer, cellular phone, or internet connection. This was not the only way changes to worship and church business because of the Covid-19 pandemic led to seismic shifts in the way mainline Protestants interact with their institutions and fellow congregants. So much of mainline Protestantism involves a spatial connection and a bond between a congregation and particular infrastructure that can go back decades or even centuries. Families sit in the same pews year after year, receive the wine or grape juice of Communion from the same chalice, or play in a specific Sunday School classroom. Some families have proudly worshipped in the same church for generations. Conflicts over the aesthetics of a sanctuary like its carpet or candle holders, the kinds of chairs used in an education wing, or the types of trees planted in an outdoor church garden are sometimes fierce. But part of the reason congregants are so passionate is that they have deep connections to their buildings. To be abruptly separated from the space of the church, and to be physically separated from fellowship with other members of the congregation, caused deep anxiety, loneliness, and despair in many cases. Congregants openly wept on Zoom calls during services, distraught that they could not hug their friends and worship next to one another. During this separation, however, it also became clear that virtual worship was a more accessible option for some folks.

This was especially true for members who were elderly or disabled living in nursing homes or care facilities, or people who had moved out of the city/state who had not been able to attend church in person prior to the pandemic.

As of 2022, the three churches are experiencing a burst of energy, what congregants delightedly told me is an unexpected but much appreciated “rebound.” Each congregation was initially hesitant to return to worship in their buildings, encouraging members to receive a Covid-19 vaccine and mandating social distancing, frequent handwashing, and the use of face masks. Second Presbyterian restarted in-person worship and “Courageous Conversations” in the latter part of 2021, and by early 2022 was seeing an influx of “young families,” a coveted demographic category. Their children’s Sunday School classes are back in full swing, and more volunteers are needed to adequately staff them. Amber, who co-facilitated the *Torn* reading group and still hopes her church will affiliate with MLP, told me that this staffing shortage is not due to lack of excitement over the increased number of children. Rather, because children’s Sunday School happens simultaneously with the sermon, in another part of the church, congregants are now more hesitant to take up the responsibility. They do not want to miss Pastor Camille’s sermons. After being away from the space so long, they do not want to miss any part of the worship service. Upon their 2022 return to in-person worship, St. Michael’s expanded from one Sunday morning service to two and has resumed planning for its yearly chicken barbeque and cookie bake, favorite events of long-time members. There is also interest in summer programming for the Open Hearts Club. Nazareth’s strategy for worship involves running a “hybrid” service, with members gathering masked in the sanctuary or viewing and participating in the service via livestream if they cannot be physically present at the church. Nazareth is once again calling for volunteers and fundraising for its community service projects and has resumed its music program

with safety protocols in place. Pastor Kenneth continues to preach each Sunday and Pastor Martha has accepted a position as Director of Children’s Ministry in another city. The congregation came together in a hybrid service to show their deep appreciation for her before her departure.

This burst of energy is being felt on a national scale, with even the trend of a steady mainline decline being called into question. A 2020 report from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) released in 2021 showed that the percentage of mainline Protestants has increased since 2018, while those identifying as evangelical Protestants experienced a “precipitous drop in affiliation” and are now outnumbered by mainliners (McKibben 2021, PRRI 2020). PRRI reports the percentage of white mainline Protestants in 2020 as 16.4, an increase from Pew’s Religious Landscape data in 2014. Among mainliners, scholars, and pollsters alike, two major questions have emerged from this study. First, where would this increase in membership be coming from? Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI., suggests that mainline churches have “absorbed” a number of evangelicals leaving their previous congregations, rather than reabsorbing those from the growing numbers of the religiously unaffiliated (Jenkins 2021). Jones is the author of *The End of White Christian America*, in which he argues that due to both demographic shifts in the American populace and disaffiliation among members, the kind of influence majority-white Christian groups (evangelicals, mainliners, Catholics, LDS, etc.) hold on American policy will continue to wane (2016:1,79). Jones invokes the idea of these institutions “dying” – a critique so often aimed at mainline churches– and extends the claim to all majority-white Christian institutions. With evangelicals increasingly embracing Trumpism (Desai 2022) and experiencing internal conflicts related to issues from Covid-19 vaccination to

the rampant spread of QAnon conspiracy theories (Alberta 2022, Graham 2022), the “ordinary” or even “boring” mainline denominations suddenly have much more appeal.

The second question this study raises is whether the data suggest a reversal of mainline decline, or something more fleeting which will give way to further decline? The period of growth is short and modest. The median age among white mainline Protestants remains firmly on the high end of religious groups in the United States, and the mainline denominations have lost so much of their cultural centrality. A full reversal seems unlikely, at least in the short term. Nonetheless, the implications of such a reversal are significant. Morale is high among congregants, who are happy to learn that their congregations might not vanish into complete cultural obscurity. Diana Butler Bass (2021), a historian of Christianity popular with mainline reading groups, notes of this study: “In the last quarter of the 20th century, mainline Protestantism faded from public view. ‘Evangelical’ became coterminous with ‘Protestant.’ If one was born after 1980, it was hard to know that mainline Protestantism even existed.” PRRI’s data could coincide with a reemergence and a greater recognition of the mainline denominations, what Butler Bass (2021) calls a “pendulum” swinging towards the more liberal pole of Protestantism in the U.S. It might also be an aberration, a temporary spike. Mainline clergy and laity continue to embrace many progressive causes, including advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights. Efforts that are specifically directed towards advocacy for marginalized groups initially slowed in the early months of the pandemic as churches reckoned with the closure of their buildings and cessation of in-person interaction. But momentum for this work is growing again. Many mainliners who traveled to Washington D.C. for the Women’s March in 2017 are participating in marches, rallies, and protests for Black Lives Matter and other racial justice organizations. They are fundraising for alleviating poverty and homelessness in their neighborhoods. Through

personal and group studies, they are not only educating themselves around aspects of LGBTQ+ identities they do not know much about, but also about discerning how they can do their part in addressing the climate crisis, finding compassionate and equitable approaches to healthcare, and curbing gun violence in schools and other public places.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused church leaders to keep much of their attention at the local level and to make changes to worship styles, particularly in how members interact. As I noted in Chapter 4, physical contact between congregants such as handshakes and hugs are a ubiquitous and indispensable aspect of fellowship, and they are part of worship itself in events like the weekly Passing of the Peace. These interactions have been curtailed, and congregants have been instructed to wave to one another or make a peace sign, maintaining social distancing. This lack of physical touch is a painful reminder of the bonds of fellowship that were abruptly thrown into disarray, and the uncertainty of their return. Pews that had been loyally filled by long-time members, sometimes for decades, are now empty, and it brings me great sadness to note that several members of each church have passed away during the first two years of the pandemic, from Covid-19 itself and from other causes. In many cases, memorials and funerals were delayed because of anxieties over gathering, which makes it difficult to parishioners to find any semblance of closure or communal mourning. Still, there is a sense of hope among congregants that church institutions will continue to be present in their lives and that the more “familiar” functions of the congregations will return. Even though the possibility of minor conflicts still causes anxiety among parishioners, they increasingly tell me that they are simply thankful to be together again. Relative to the medical, logistical, and emotional chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, simmering conflicts in the congregations seem familiar, and not so threatening.

6.2 Summary of the Argument

As mainline congregants begin to return to their buildings, albeit with trepidation, meeting for worship services, administrative meetings, Bible studies, and fellowship time with other parishioners, work continues to discern how best to provide welcoming spaces where LGBTQ+ people can thrive. This work is the product of continuing debates over who to welcome into mainline institutions and why cultivating inclusive environments will ultimately benefit congregations in spiritual and practical terms. It would be foolish to suggest that mainline Protestant congregations will always provide optimal environments for LGBTQ+ Christians, or that they will automatically be inclined to try, simply because they have a reputation as “liberal.” LGBTQ+ Christians of color, and those who are transgender, gender-nonconforming, or nonbinary continue to encounter more barriers to feeling welcomed than white gays and lesbians. Conflict will continue over how a congregation should provide space for LGBTQ+ people to grow and discern their religiosity, without the notion of this space-making being dismissed as “political” or distracting from holier pursuits. These shortcomings of mainline institutions must be a key topic of further scholarship on participation by marginalized groups within Christianity. As they return to their churches, mainliners also have an opportunity for further discernment and change, and many mainliners note they must quickly and effectively reckon with shortcomings if they want their institutions to truly represent the tenets of the Christian faith as they understand it. LGBTQ+ Christians, especially those with intersecting identities which make them “multiply-burdened,” experience what they perceive to be microaggressions when interacting with congregants with privileged identities (Crenshaw 1989:140). They continue to face implicit barriers to participating fully, some of which they might not have expected. At times, they encounter explicit hostility or animosity from anti-queer pew-mates. They must also deal with

perceptions, sometimes internalized, that being queer and Christian are mutually exclusive, and that they are somehow trying to live an incompatibility.

Despite the volatility these issues can cause, mainline institutions offer some of the most amenable spaces to LGBTQ+ people of any Christian group. Further, mainliners are using Christian practices and Christian theology to cultivate these spaces, and queer people are playing a key role in changing mainline institutions. I echo Robbins' (2003) endorsement of comparative conversations to find similarities and differences between groups of Christians. I stress that for such a project to be effective, mainline Protestants must be included in groups being compared, in particular queer and queer-affirming mainliners. Their commitments not just to tolerate but to celebrate LGBTQ+ people with enthusiasm are fundamentally different from so many other Christians. Understanding mainline Protestantism is vital to understanding the range of Christian approaches to LGBTQ+ identity not simply because these denominations are discussing LGBTQ+ issues. These discussions are happening to some degree across Christian groups globally. What makes mainline institutions in the United States distinct from other Christian groups is their willingness to take positions in support of LGBTQ+ equity, and to modify theology and practice. They implement concrete actions meant explicitly to include queer people, and grow numbers of actively participating queer members. They are some of the most likely places for openly-LGBTQ+ people to hold positions of power. LGBTQ+ leaders have the authority to use that power to engage in collective labor with a congregation to improve the climate of their institutions. Mainliners are also among the most likely to utilize their resources to advocate for LGBTQ+ people in civic, legislative, or judicial contexts. While the kind of "cultural influence" I discussed in Chapter 5 has dwindled, each denomination still possesses significant membership, infrastructure, and capital. A critical mass of participants within these

denominations is interested in advancing causes and policies around notions of social justice. They are motivated by a faith that is not always loudly shouted but is very present, even if they are not always aware of the power they have to mobilize on the basis of that faith.

In “Geologies of Queer Studies: It’s Déjà vu All Over Again,” Gayle Rubin (2011:355-356) speaks of the fragility and effervescence of queer knowledges, noting that while the stability that comes with institutionalization and bureaucratization may appear dull or stale, it better ensures the transmission of knowledge for a community that remains marginal in so many contexts. In so many senses, LGBTQ+ Christians in American mainline Protestant churches are doing in religious institutions what Rubin calls for in terms of academic infrastructure. Not only are they making space in institutions that are durable, but they are also using the stability provided by these institutions to create and preserve queer knowledge. Through approaches to theology, worship, and the reconciliation of their queerness with religious ways of being, queer congregants are preserving queer knowledge in the context of the mainline denominations, spurring national policies and local actions to make being a queer Christian less difficult. Like so many institutions which were once considered unassailable, mainline Protestant congregations are vulnerable to both criticism from anti-LGBTQ+ forces and to the ongoing atrophy of their membership, infrastructure, and finances. Anxieties over whether mainline institutions are durable enough not to fade permeates mainliners’ conversations, meetings, and prayers. For the moment, these churches remain places where LGBTQ+ people can find avenues to participate, belong, to continue the work ahead. Congregants continue to explore what their institutions are capable of, and how resources and labor can be allocated in pursuit of more expansive and inclusive faith communities.

6.3 Continuing Questions

In this dissertation, I have framed LGBTQ+ religiosity in relation to how queer church members contribute to the daily functioning of their religious institutions. Fellowship with the congregation involves LGBTQ+ people in the ritual of the worship service and its sacraments, as well as the church's administrative functions, but it also entails being part of the group, from participating in a hobby circle to doing the most menial chores in the building. As Benny's story in Chapter 5 shows, discussion and debate over LGBTQ+ inclusion in congregational settings has to do mostly with what queer congregants are (not) permitted to do. Luke's preaching at Second Presbyterian or Meredith's acolyte duties at St. Michael's highlight the results of queer folks more freely interacting with the congregation. Regarding pro-LGBTQ+ theologizing as a component of queer religiosity, much of what I witnessed was the cultivation of defenses. These defenses, or *apologetics*, are crafted and refined to provide justifications of queer existence in Christian spaces, anticipating that they will be needed to counter theological arguments that oppose the presence of LGBTQ+ parishioners. When the *Unclobber* group looked at Bible verses in Genesis or Romans, or the Nazareth ONA committee prepared to answer congregants' queries before the vote to adopt their Covenant of Welcome, they worked not only to educate themselves. They also sought to articulate their perspectives on sexuality and gender relative to religion, and to construct an apologetics that would shield themselves and other queer congregants from moral attack.

But just as LGBTQ+ agency in mainline churches cannot be framed purely in terms of resistance to oppressive forms of religiosity, theological understandings of queerness cannot be limited to apologetics. Austen Hartke argues in *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* that because the vilification of LGBTQ+ by Christians has been so

extensive and so caustic, engagement with the sacred in the interest of cultivating an apologetic is understandable, even good (2018:144). In some settings, a strong defense is imperative and lifesaving. He continues, however, that to focus on apologetics, or “what’s wrong,” is not life-giving, and that LGBTQ+ Christians must also engage the sacred with joy and contentment (2018:144-145). Not all LGBTQ+ theologizing is defensive, nor is it always related to ways of interacting with the institution of a particular church.

And what about queer religiosity that is not focused on participatory acts, but of “queering” Christianity? A growing literature provides queer readings of Christian theology [e.g., Patrick Cheng’s *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality and Spirit* (2013) and Linn Marie Tonstad’s *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (2018)] and resources like Queertheology.com are reaching people digitally. Such sources give a sense of how LGBTQ+ laity, non-specialists in Christian theology, interact with queerness and Christianity. But more questions remain. How are they being innovative (or conventional) in the development of personal theologies relative to other mainline Protestants? As queer seminarians train in increasing numbers to be clergy in the mainline denominations, does the leadership of LGBTQ+ pastors and priests affect how laity develop theology related to queer issues? Finally, how are LGBTQ+ Christians sharing these theologies with others, including other queer folks? While queer theologies are being developed in the contexts of churches and seminaries, LGBTQ+ Christians also provide windows into their personal theologies through a multitude of online platforms: blogs, Twitter posts, series on YouTube and other platforms like it, podcasts, and autobiographical memoirs. These media hold a vast and diverse archive of queer approaches to Christian theology, some by queer mainline Protestants but also evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons, and adherents to other Christian traditions.

The ecumenical and even interfaith nature of queer theological engagement in digital spaces brings me to a second set of continuing questions. While individual congregations provide stable sites from which to examine mainline Protestant institutions, congregations are not the only arenas of advocacy for queer people of faith. I spent time during my research with groups that went beyond the local congregational level in scope and membership, mostly in regional and statewide denominational meetings and grassroots LGBTQ+ advocacy. I see rich opportunities for research that builds on this dissertation by an expansion of focus to LGBTQ+ Christians whose organizing and advocacy takes place in ecumenical and interfaith organizations that reflect a more diverse and pluralistic religious landscape in the U.S. (Patel 2018). This shift in perspective would move attention from worship and administration in physical church spaces to forms of religious advocacy that connect queer folks nationwide (or globally) via digital networks. This focus would further call into question the assumption that queer people of faith do not create their own inclusion in religious spaces and are wholly dependent on the deference of gatekeepers who are not queer themselves. Finally, I would like to know more about how queer Christians help to shape contemporary debates over issues of (often deadly) violence against transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the United States – including the killing of Black trans man Tony McDade by Tallahassee police in 2020 (Dickson 2020) – and the raft of legislation and executive directives emerging in several states that target gender-affirming care for youth, usage of school facilities (including bathrooms) consistent with gender identity, or transgender participation in sports (Caspani 2022, Harper and Brooks 2022).

6.4 Concluding Thoughts

When an academic colleague questioned the efficacy of Catholic women's prayers to Saint Jude, part of a religious tradition in which Robert Orsi was raised, Orsi wrote, "I was not *in*

enough to contribute to the ongoing life of the tradition, share its consolations, or experience the power of its account of the world, but not *out* enough to assent to my colleague's sharp dismissal" (2005:151). It is not uncommon for scholars of religion to have an isomorphic relationship with the traditions they work in. I feel a similar relationship as Orsi with the traditions I study. I possess a sense of understanding, recognition, and respect for mainline Protestantism, but I also maintain a distance from it. This is what many queer people raised in American Christian spaces feel, a seemingly incompatible mix of ambivalence, resentment, and nostalgia. I think back to when I was twelve or thirteen, sitting with my family in a small Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in rural central Pennsylvania. Our pastor had been ordained in the UCC, and I spent about the first ten years of my life in a UCC church. When he left the denomination over positions he considered "too liberal," many families followed him to the OPC, including mine. He relished conservative doctrines, and endorsed public positions of the OPC in support of "family values." To introduce his sermon, printed in the bulletin as "The Sin of Homosexuality," he quoted the English Standard Version (ESV) translation of the Romans 1 "clobber passage."

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

I was an avid Sunday School attendee. I knew my Bible stories well. King David had sinned terribly during his life. Moses (who I had played in a church pageant as a five-year-old) had killed a man in Egypt. Paul had persecuted early Christians and ordered their deaths. In none of these cases did God "give up" on them. How heinous homosexuality must be, the pastor stated,

that it would deserve such abandonment. We too should abandon in kind. He told us he stopped listening to the English rock band “The Smiths” when he learned that frontman Morrissey had been in relationships with men. While everyone deserved love, he said, showing tolerance or acceptance of homosexuals was not the kind of love God approved of. The pastor who had just said such a painful thing had always been very kind to me. I had grown up admiring this pastor, who had an answer to every question I asked. I had picked his brain for year with queries like “Were there dinosaurs on Noah’s Ark?” (his answer was “no”). “Is my cat Sylvester in heaven?” (his answer was also “no”). But now I had a whole new host of question I could not and would not ask. First among them: “Am I going to hell too?”

A few years later I left the church, citing ideological differences. I renounced my membership with the invitation to visit as often as I like if I did not partake in the Lord’s Supper. As an undergraduate anthropology major, I was conducting a research project on how Christians read the Bible and frame their own experiences in terms of characters from its various books. I was rejected by two nondenominational fundamentalist congregations I approached because they were suspicious of the kinds of questions I might ask parishioners. My advisor suggested I begin visiting a few of the mainline churches that surrounded the college. As I entered their stately stone buildings through intricately manicured yards and gardens, I found their leaders much more willing to invite me in. The day I initially visited her office, the pastor of a UCC church even invited me to attend a talent show the congregation held in their basement social hall, fundraising for their local food pantry.

When I descended the stairs into the brightly lit room, I felt like I would lose my balance from shock of what I saw. The small circular tables spread throughout the room were dotted with same-sex couples listening to a guitarist on the stage at the back of the hall. I grasped the

handrail to stop from falling; my knees felt like they would buckle. Some of the couples had their arms around each other. Some were holding hands. A few were tending to their children. One of the couples near the stairs heard me enter and beckoned me to sit with them. “You’re welcome here, and we really mean that,” one of them said. I told them the pastor had invited me. “She means it too! She’s marrying us as soon as the law changes.” They asked if I needed a church home or if I wanted to talk to someone about church. I assume they sensed I was queer too, and they wanted to be helpful. When the acts for the night concluded, the pastor asked if the assembled group would be willing to sing with her. As hymnals were passed out, the guitarist began to play chords of the first verse of the 1994 Marty Haugen hymn “All Are Welcome.”

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions;
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

The experiences of rejection, scorn, and derision my queer interlocutors chose to share with me in my fieldwork are far worse than what I experienced, given the manifold privileges I hold. But I close with a glimpse of my own narrative because it juxtaposes two very different kinds of reception a queer person can find in American Christianity. Those receptions have power in shaping the way LGBTQ+ people navigate Christianity and whether they remain bound to a church. The power of being accepted is not only a triumph over shame and guilt but is also an opportunity for a newfound or rekindled relationship with the Church. This relationship requires vulnerability but also a willingness to protect the institution from its association with queerness. The resilience of LGBTQ+ parishioners who claim a place for themselves in religious

institutions that have excluded them for so long is incredibly moving and laudable. I do not want to romanticize or fetishize such perseverance, however, when it comes up against very real trauma. Even when queer mainline Protestants frame their experiences with religious institutions in terms of discovery, a sense of wonder, and the bliss of finding a loving community, there are still numerous hardships which haunt and distress them.

I have worked to honor the joy and peace many LGBTQ+ mainliners report feeling in the churches they have joined, but it is necessary to juxtapose moments of reconciliation with instances of devastation, abandonment, and feelings of being in danger or under scrutiny. Many queer Christians are subjected to these trials on a regular basis, especially those who hold marginalized racial and gender identities. For many LGBTQ+ Christians who grew up in a religious community, spending years in youth groups, bell choirs, and service teams, only to find that community's love and support are conditional, can result in a trepidation that is not easily abandoned. The feeling of being an interloper, even in the churches most committed to equitable change can remain. Anxiety about trespassing when entering a sanctuary, gazing at a stained-glass window, or speaking the words of the Lord's Prayer may endure, even if a church drapes itself in rainbows and proclaims welcome at every opportunity. That one will share too much about themselves with fellow congregants and make them uncomfortable or hostile, or conversely, that one will be asked overly personal questions – these are constant worries. As Taylor, a lesbian congregant, told me:

I just had this happen this week actually. Someone who gives off a little bit of an authoritarian vibe asked me some questions about it. I realized and understood that they already knew I was gay, it's not anything that I hide. I always am open to conversation, however if it crosses a boundary, I'll let you know. I'm a stand-up person about who I am. So they actually asked me if I was in a relationship and

if who I lived with was my girlfriend. I said “Whatever you assume that situation to be, you can think that, it’s not something I discuss.” If I get the intuition that the person wants to know for their own growth, I’m generally happy to share my experience, but I also understand that I do not want to be a poster child for the gay community. I am one gay person in this huge world.

Even if this kind of personal disclosure is not an issue, there may be concern by LGBTQ+ members that the stability of the institution itself might become even more precarious because of their continued presence. As I write this dissertation, the United Methodist Church (UMC), largest of the mainline “Seven Sisters,” is in the process of splitting, largely over issues of same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly LGBTQ+ pastors. A new Global Methodist Church (GMC) has been launched, which takes a theologically conservative stance on LGBTQ+ issues (Adams 2022). While the UMC’s governing General Conference has yet to vote on protocols for separating the denomination along these ideological lines, many individual Methodist churches across the globe are not waiting. They are initiating processes of disaffiliation from the UMC to join the breakaway denomination (Fowler 2022). Friends and colleagues who are queer Methodists are excited for the potential of what a more equitable UMC can provide. But they also feel deep pain at being a rallying point and a scapegoat in the prolonged and excruciating schism. Not every Christian institution may be thrust into a situation like the one the UMC is embroiled in, but LGBTQ+ members might still be made to feel that they put their individual church at risk of losing its vitality. Meredith spoke to this feeling as we sat in her SUV, the snow flurry outside becoming more intense. She told me that a few weeks after she started regularly attending St. Michael’s, she heard about a comment another member made in a study group about her presence.

Someone had said, “does this mean we are going to be a gay church?” This was a woman, older, sort of opinionated. She said, “Will we put up a gay flag? Are more gay people going to come in here?” She was worried about what would happen to the church and if people would join.

Meredith said she felt guilty when she heard the gossip, like she was being blamed for driving the church towards a precipice. “But that’s not the end of the story,” she continued.

A lot of things happened, all convoluted at the same time. Right after that, I had been asked to speak [during the worship service] for the stewardship committee and I tied my story of finding the church and how important it was to my growth as a Christian and an Episcopalian. Almost sort of having a resurrection with my faith. When I told that story, after that tale, that was when I came out as a lesbian to the whole congregation. After that whole conversation, there wasn’t much of a dry eye in the house, and another senior member of the congregation came up to me and said, “If you ever need a father, I am your go-to-guy.” And he still reminds me of that every single week. That to me was the most affirming thing anyone has ever done to me.

In keeping with my central argument that mainline Protestant churches in the United States are simultaneously capable of innovative forms of LGBTQ+ inclusivity and are spaces of volatility and internal tension, Meredith’s tendency to highlight both a persevering hope and a lingering sense of exclusion is not surprising. While one person offered Meredith an incredibly affirming show of support she will remember for the rest of her life, another feared the ramifications her presence might bring for the congregation. This tension often results in LGBTQ+ mainliners finding it difficult to discuss their connection to faith, or their journeys into the congregations where they have helped to create a welcoming space. Still, they contend that sharing their stories, attending church, and being active participants in congregational life will be pathbreaking acts. Such acts will preserve the institutions to which they belong and make way

for future LGBTQ+ people to find friendlier environments with richer queer histories. These future congregants will, they hope, more freely contribute to keeping church traditions alive without feeling that they have to actively challenge or resist discrimination or prejudice. Instead, they can feel a freedom to live openly and worship, learn, and grow spiritually, as anyone else might do

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