

Final version published as:

Swafford, T. R., Brandon-Friedman, R. A., & Ungaro, A. M. (2023). Forming identities of their own: gay men reconciling self-love, hurt, and the impact of the Pentecostal Church. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 42(4), 458-476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2023.2229768>

**Forming Identities of their Own: Gay Men Reconciling Self-Love, Hurt, and the Impact of the Pentecostal Church**

Tayon R. Swafford, MSW, GCESWP, MTS<sup>1</sup>

Richard A. Brandon-Friedman, Ph.D., LCSW, LCAC<sup>1,2</sup>

Anthony M. Ungaro, Ed.D.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Work, Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA

<sup>2</sup> School of Medicine, Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA

<sup>3</sup> School of Nursing, Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA

### Abstract

According to data analyzed from the Gallup Daily Tracking Politics and Economy survey between 2015 and 2017, nearly half (46.7%) of LGBT adults in the U.S. are religious, and just over half (53.3%) of LGBT adults are not religious. The majority who identified as religious attend Protestant churches. The Pentecostal church is a member of the Protestant Christian tradition. In a Constructivist Grounded Theory study of six U.S. gay male, Pentecostal Christians, our study excavates and chronicles their journey toward wholeness. Three major themes emerged from our study: *embracing the journey*, *belonging to a community*, and *living unapologetically*. From these themes, we learned that wholeness becomes possible when gay male Christians can form identities that are uniquely and holistically their own. We used these themes as a clarion call for clinicians who engage with clients encountering a conflict between their religious/spiritual tradition and their sexual orientation to actively assist their clients with reducing the dissonance they experience.

*Keywords:* Pentecostal, LGBTQIA+, gay male, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Wholeness, Social Work

### **Forming Identities of their Own: Gay Men Reconciling Self-Love, Hurt, and the Impact of the Pentecostal Church**

Sunday is considered ‘the Sabbath’ for many Christians in North America. Instead of fretting about paying bills or feverishly working to meet deadlines, Sunday is synonymous with church bells ringing, congregants singing, and a religious official preaching the Word of God into the ears, hearts, and minds of all in attendance, physically and digitally. From this depiction, it is arguable that religion and religiosity are woven into the fabric of U.S. social life. However, only 65% of U.S. adults self-identify as Christian, and only 45% of U.S. adults attend church services on a regular (monthly) basis (Pew Research Center, 2019). Data from the Pew Research Center (2019) reported that 2% of U.S. adults identify as Jewish, 1% identify as Buddhist and Hindu, respectively, and 3% identify with other faiths, including those who adhere to their own religious/philosophical/spiritual principles (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Recent studies have linked the source of the decrease of U.S. adults who identify as Christian and/or attend church services to generational replacement (Pew Research Center, 2015 and 2019). The idea behind generational replacement is that people who would have normally attended church and prioritized being religious are choosing to emphasize other life areas instead, including but not limited to family, school, self, and work. Although plausible, generational replacement does not align with people who desire to remain connected with their churches or religion in general. Similarly, generational replacement does not account for the near even split of U.S. adults in LGBTQIA+ communities who are either affiliated or not affiliated with a church or religious tradition. According to data analyzed from the Gallup Daily Tracking Politics and Economy survey between 2015 and 2017, “Nearly half (46.7%) of LGBT adults [in the U.S.] are religious; just over half (53.3%) of LGBT adults are not religious” (Conron et al.,

2020, p. 5). Of the adults who identified as religious, the majority attend churches in the Protestant tradition.

The Pentecostal church is a member of the Protestant Christian tradition. Weaver and Brakke (2009) explained that Pentecostal church services are guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, and believers directly experience God's presence. Similarly, religious leaders and congregants center the Holy Spirit's readiness, willingness, and ability to dwell in the hearts of all who believe in God's power. Many Pentecostal Christians view the opportunity to receive the power of the Holy Spirit as the pinnacle of the church experience. Yet, the pinnacle experience may neither be obtainable nor desired for U.S. adults who identify as LGBTQIA+ Christians due to an inability to establish and maintain genuine, holistic, and meaningful relationships with other believers. Wood and Conley (2013) explained that some LGBTQIA+ Christians may feel that they are being spiritually neglected by their religious leaders and/or other believers for living incongruently with the church's policies, procedures, and beliefs. The lack of congruence could result in LGBTQIA+ Christians struggling to obtain a sense of wholeness within themselves, their relationships, and their connection to a specific church or religion, generally.

Our study explores how gay males' lived experiences have affected the development of their gender/sexual, religious/spiritual identities and their desire to affiliate with the Pentecostal church. Before uncovering the variety of lived experiences we learned during interviews with current and former gay male Pentecostal Christians, our paper acknowledges the struggles that some gay male Christians face when required to choose between their religious/spiritual and gender/sexual orientations. We also describe the impact that moral and spiritual injury can have on gay male Christians. Then, we address how gay male Christians have endured struggles in their search for wholeness. Finally, we discuss the implication of endurance for gay male

Christians, and we provide strategies for clinicians (e.g., social workers) to use to assist their clients with reducing the dissonance they experience. Our argument is that gay male Christians' search for wholeness should not require identity bifurcation or elimination. For wholeness to become a reality, gay male Christians must be able to live and love without fear or judgment.

### **Literature Review**

Exploring the lived experiences of gay male Christians requires an acknowledgment of how some have struggled with social perception, reception, and treatment by religious leaders and/or congregants. In a study of 50 interviews with diverse stakeholders who attend churches in Black/African American communities, Pingel and Bauermeister (2018) found that most churches' interactions with their gay or bisexual members were extremely negative. Responses of this magnitude are devastating, especially for those in Pingel and Bauermeister's (2018) study because the church is often seen as the core of Black/African American culture wherein sermons, songs, and testimonies are experienced in community with other congregants also searching for wholeness (Weaver & Brakke, 2009).

The concern for some who are gay male Christians is that wholeness is at the expense of disclosing their sexuality. For others, wholeness has necessitated leaving their Pentecostal church or religion overall because they refuse to choose between loving themselves, their partners, and affiliating with their church or religion. Weighing the benefits and disadvantages of reconciling self-love and the Pentecostal church can impact one's religious identity due to that person being exposed to severe internal and external stressors (Harris et al., 2012). In addition to exposure to stressors, attempting to reconcile one's sexual orientation with their desire to maintain loyalty to their church could result in being morally and spiritually injured. Moral injuries are caused when an individual's innermost beliefs, ideas, and values are contradicted by what they have directly

experienced. Even though moral injury was originally applied to war (Shay 2014), gay male Christians sustain moral injuries when they are placed in situations where they must choose between allegiance to their identities, their partners, families, and/or their church. Jinkerson (2016) wrote that gay male Christians experience crises when they perceive that their sexuality is wrong. Jinkerson (2016) and Stein (2012) correlate symptoms of depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts and images with experiencing moral injuries.

Moral injuries can be combined with spiritual injuries. Gay male Christians may experience spiritual injuries when they are made to feel ashamed of who they are or whom they love by religious leaders or congregants. Berg (2011) associated spiritual injuries with having an absence of meaning and purpose in life. Similarly, Starnino et al. (2019) related moral and spiritual injuries with experiencing trauma. In a study written on pastoral care, Klän (2018) cited the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's definition of trauma, indicating that trauma can alter a person's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities. Covington (2019) amplified the dialogue on trauma by showing how trauma and faith coalesce when a traumatic situation causes one to question their relationship with God. Attempting to address any issues related to questioning one's relationship with God or processing the variety of ways moral and spiritual injuries can be experienced becomes difficult without natural, human supports. In a study of 25 individuals who self-identified as lesbian and gay, Crockett et al. (2017) learned that the amount of natural, human support received was contingent on the church's level of affirmation of a gay member's sexuality. Participants in Crockett et al.'s (2017) study who maintained an affiliation with their church communities received messages that required them to choose their membership over their sexuality. As a result, some participants lost those upon whom they depended during times of need (Crockett et al., 2017).

In these situations, gay male Christians likely felt that an inability to exist as fully spiritual and sexual beings was too heavy of a burden to bear. As a result, many LGBTQIA+ have left both their specific church communities and religion. Hart et al. (2018) studied the lived experience of seven adult White men, who were formerly members of various Christian traditions. Each participant in Hart et al.'s (2018) study recounted their spiritual upbringing from childhood and addressed the factors that contributed to their decision to prioritize their gender/sexual orientation and pursue spiritual cohesion outside of a Christian tradition. One participant in Hart et al.'s (2018) study justified their departure by sharing that spirituality and sexuality coexist. For this participant, recognizing the coexistence of spirituality and sexuality permitted him to experience God in a new and liberatory way.

It is critical to note that new and liberatory experiences of God do not necessitate one's departure from their church if their church's mission, vision, and values align with and celebrates the many ways that sexuality and spirituality can be concurrently experienced and embodied by gay males. In a study of a group of Zambian men in Africa who identify as gay and Christian, Klinken (2015) found that the participants are empowered to and live wholly in their queerness by prioritizing and amplifying their love of others, themselves, and God, thereby enabling them to possess and demonstrate human agency in ways that are unimaginable in more restrictive churches. Golomski (2020) interviewed pastors of a church in South Africa to learn how the religious leaders and congregants have created a space where people feel free to holistically express and embody sexuality and spirituality. Even though Golomski's (2020) study will be discussed in more detail later, it is critical to note the similarities between Golomski (2020) and Klinken's (2015) studies: first, both studies centralize rather than peripheralize the lives and experiences of gay male Christians. Second, both studies' target populations are Pentecostal.

### **The Present Study**

Despite the glimmer of hope offered by Golomski (2020) and Klinken's (2015) studies, we note the dearth of literature and research connected to the integration of gender, sexuality, and religion for gay male Pentecostals in the U.S. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies in the U.S. that excavate and chronicle how gay male, Pentecostal, Christians have reconciled their gender/sexual and religious/spiritual identities. Similarly, there are no studies in the U.S. that examine the benefits of reconciling all aspects of one's identity, regardless of whether it includes a choice to remain affiliated with a Pentecostal church or religion. Both of these gaps in the literature need to be addressed because sustaining significant relationships with other people are among the most essential connections one can have in their lives (Wasson & Hess, 1989).

To address these gaps, we have taken a qualitative approach to learning about and analyzing the journeys of six gay adult males in the U.S. who have been affiliated with a Pentecostal church. Our guiding research question was: *How has your church experience affected the development of your gender/sexual, religious/spiritual identities and your desire to affiliate with a Pentecostal church?* Our study uses this question to engage Pentecostal Christian religious leaders and congregants in a much-needed dialogue on what happens in the heads, minds, hearts, and worlds of gay male, Pentecostal Christians while searching for wholeness within and outside of the church, their relationships, and themselves.



### **Methodology**

We used Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist grounded theory to guide our data collection and analysis processes. . We chose Constructivist grounded theory because it is predicated on the researchers' and participants' understanding and mutual sharing of each other's lived experiences as knowledge sources. Constructivist grounded theory does not require a researcher to remain neutral or for reflexivity to be optional unlike its positivistic predecessor (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory advanced a multiplicity of thoughts, feelings, social locations, and perspectives with the researchers' and participants' intricate involvement in the data collection and analysis processes. We note that Constructivist grounded theory's data collection and analysis processes are circular in nature, which enables a researcher to learn from and with their data continuously (Charmaz, 2014)

### **Data Type, Sampling Information, and Participant Recruitment**

Our study's data and findings are based on interviews with adult, gay males in the U.S., who have been affiliated with a Pentecostal church. We limited our inclusion criteria to men because they would be the gender most likely to serve in positions of authority in the Pentecostal church, such as pastors, ministers, and deacons (Weaver & Brakke, 2009). We required participants to be at least 18 years old so we could receive legal consent. Originally, study participants were required to reside in Indiana so state-specific resources could have been provided after the interview, if necessary. However, we filed an amendment and received approval from our university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Protocol: 2012030705) to remove the residential requirement. By removing the requirement, we increased the potential number of study participants.

We used purposive (Daniels, 2004) and snowball sampling in our study to improve the probability that our participants would be able to provide information to help us address our research question. With this in mind, participants were recruited through an advertisement/flyer hung in the common area in two U.S. Pentecostal churches, a flyer-image posted to LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups, and word of mouth. The advertisement/flyer contained the research question, the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and the lead researcher's contact information. Before the advertisement/flyer was used, approval was sought and received by Indiana University's IRB. Seven participants contacted the lead researcher through these recruitment efforts. The lead researcher e-mailed each person who contacted a copy of the informed consent and a Zoom link to facilitate a meeting. After meeting with each person and confirming inclusionary criteria, six people decided to join the study.

#### **Use of a Case Study, Interview Guide, and Interview Facilitation**

After receiving approval, the lead researcher re-read Golomski's (2020) study. Even though Golomski's (2020) participants belonged to a Protestant Christian church in South Africa, the lead author was captivated by the extent participants were able to exist in church as their complete selves. The lead researcher used Golomski (2020) as a case study to frame this study's interview guide around exploring, describing, and explaining the factors that affect religious leaders, congregants' and/or participants willingness to create spaces where gay members feel empowered and safe to attend church as fully sexual and spiritual beings.

Our interview guide was constructed with the intent of giving voice to a population and community who remain voiceless. We asked participants to describe their sexual orientations, whether and to what extent their sexual orientations have informed their living of life, and how their sexual orientations have aided in them assigning value to being affiliated with a Pentecostal church or religion. Before each interview, participants were asked to review the informed consent. At the beginning of each meeting, the lead researcher reviewed the informed consent with each participant and asked each participant to raise any questions or concerns about the study, potential risks and/or benefits of participating. After answering questions, the lead researcher asked for verbal permission to record the interview and he re-confirmed permission to record once the camera was in operation. Permission was received from each participant to record the interview, and the lead researcher conducted every interview. Following Charmaz (2014) and Hanley-Maxwell et al. (2007), each interview was semi-structured. A semi-structured interview process allows a researcher to garner data pertaining to a participant's lived experience without forgoing following the participant's lead and exploring topics of highest interest to and for them.

Each interview was conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Once the interview was complete, the audio and video files were stored on an encrypted device, transcribed verbatim, and coded by the lead and third researchers. Both researchers reviewed each transcript and met to talk through the main ideas illuminating from each interview. After achieving agreement, the lead and third researchers created a coding guide that was used to code all transcripts. The data analysis process began with initial and focused coding through using *in-vivo*, belief, attitude, process, descriptive, affective, and versus coding types in alignment with Saldaña (2016). The lead and third researchers coded independently and met to compare and

process codes to ensure consistency was maintained and saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2014). The lead and third researchers used memo-writing to transition from initial into focused coding because it gave the distance necessary for the researchers to consider how to best capture and narrate the story told and the information gathered from our participants. In conjunction with memo-writing, initial and focused coding assisted in the creation of categories containing properties of the study's most salient data. Codes were then used for creating a theory of wholeness and identity formation.

### **Establishment of Trustworthiness: Credibility and Confirmability**

The establishment of trustworthiness is paramount in a qualitative study; we established trustworthiness through credibility and confirmability (Charmaz, 2014; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

#### ***Credibility***

Credibility is achieved when confidence can be placed in a study's findings. We established credibility by conducting a pilot interview to assess the efficacy, tone, language, and impact of the interview questions. We also established credibility through member checking and triangulation. Member checking permitted us to verify the accuracy of each transcript and the interpretations that the research team garnered from each transcript. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) and Hanley-Maxwell (2007) lauded triangulation for its ability to show a study's comprehensiveness and robustness by juxtaposing and intersecting data collection methods. Our study triangulated the key themes and findings of Golomski (2020) with the information we learn from our participants' interviews. In this way, triangulation helped the lead and third researchers identify the most prominent themes that best addressed the study's research question.

*Confirmability*

Confirmability means that a researcher can establish patterns and trends manifesting in the data based on documentation, instead of researcher bias. We met the criteria of confirmability through maintaining an audit trail and through reflexivity. Our audit trail provided a roadmap of the project's research process by the first and third researchers documenting each step taken throughout the study. Reflexivity is understood as being attentive to the effect that the researchers' biases and/or perspectives have on their approach to performing the research and/or interpreting the study's findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a).

Our research team consisted of three people: the lead researcher, who identifies as Black, gay, Christian, is over the age of 18, and is a doctoral candidate in social work. The lead researcher's primary areas of inquiry are gender, racial, and sexual orientation development over the life course; the integration of minoritized and underrepresented identities with religion and spirituality; and the use of self-awareness and community integration to overcome the impact of identity-based trauma. The second researcher, who identifies as White, non-Christian, and is over the age of 18, is a licensed clinical social worker, possesses a Doctor of Philosophy degree in social work, and is an assistant professor of social work and medicine. The second researcher's primary areas of inquiry are exploring the gender and sexual orientations and expressions of youth. The third researcher, who identifies as White, gender-nonspecific, and Christian, is over the age of 18, and possesses a doctorate degree in education and is employed at a school of nursing. The third author's primary areas of inquiry are exploring the intersectionality of college-aged students' various identity markers and the impact those markers have on their academic success.

## Results

Table 1 contains demographic information of the study's participants. As illustrated in the Table, five participants (83%) identified as White/European American, and one participant (17%) identified as Black/African American. Three participants (50%) were between 30-39 years old, whereas one participant was between 40 to 49 years old, and two participants (33%) were between 50 to 60 years old. Only three participants are currently affiliated with a Pentecostal church, and coincidentally, none of the participants remained affiliated with their original church communities. Table 1 also shows that two participants identified as Agnostic, and one participant identified as spiritual.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information of the Study's Participants*

Number	Race/Ethnicity	Age Range	Current Religious Affiliation
2	White	50-60	Pentecostal
1	White	40-49	Pentecostal
1	White	30-39	Agnostic
1	White	30-39	Spiritual
1	Black	30-39	Agnostic

As shown in Table 2, three major themes and their properties manifested during the interviews: *embracing the journey, belonging to a community, and living unapologetically.*

**Table 2**

*Categories and Associated Properties*

Categories	Properties
Embracing the Journey	Lived experience Processing pain
Belonging to a Community	Need for Social Connection Creating Physical and Mental Space

Living unapologetically

Being resilient

Voice and choice

Transformed Childhood Self-image

### **Category I: Embracing the Journey**

Three participants (50%) made direct reference to embracing their journeys. Typically, the word journey has a physical connotation, representing the act of traveling from one place to another. For instance, Participant 1 interpreted journey physically when asked whether there was a time when he was not able to be his true self. He explained:

I was living in Virginia, thought I was going to live my entire life in Virginia, and things changed, and I ended up in Indianapolis, gradually I was able to become the person that I am.

Virginia was Participant 1's birth state and "stomping ground" for he was familiar with the beliefs, values, and culture particular to him, his family, and society. Participant 1 recounted:

When I was growing up, I grew up basically as a Southern Baptist, and we were very conservative. I was in the closet until my mid-thirties. I just didn't think that there was a place for me. So, me getting back into the church, and being an openly gay man and being married and everything, that is a new experience for me. That's basically where I'm at right now, I mean it's all a very new experience for me. I didn't think up until recently it was possible.

Participant 1 shifted from conceptualizing journey in primarily physical terms into more internal terms as the interview progressed. When asked for clarification, Participant 1 indicated that he was not in the head or heart space to conceive of the possibility of being gay and Christian until recently due to how he was raised because his father expected him to be thinking about women and preparing for fatherhood to continue his family's legacy. But Participant 1 was able to conceptualize being gay and Christian once he moved from Virginia to Indiana and met his future husband.

There were some similarities in the lived experiences between participants 1 and 2. Specifically, participant 2 notes how “homosexuality” was disregarded when he was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, along with the effect that this knowledge had on him. Participant 2 shared:

So even though I knew I was gay or different when I was little, it was always suppressed because that just wasn't, wasn't something you did, or you talked about, or even was remotely acceptable. Growing up in church, you stifle that, and you go through the emotions. And I knew at an early age that I had a good sense of spirituality with God, I was closely connected with God, but it was very disconnected from the church because of the rules and regulations, and I never felt at home in my dad's church at all.

Participant 2 had a knowledge of his sexuality and also knew what was deemed permissible in his culture. It was a part of Participant 2's lived experience to suppress his sexuality, which as he explained, made it impossible for him to feel connected to his father's church. Later in the interview, Participant 2 reframed journey in more spiritual terms by sharing:

Let the spirit of God work with you. He will lead you down the path you need to go, to become who you need to become. Often times, we don't listen to that. We listen to the whispers of other people, “You should live this way, you should live that way,” when all along, God has set you on a path to achieve what you need to achieve to become who you need to become. The minute that we stray from that, or we start deceiving ourselves by trying to lie to ourselves, “I need to do this because that is what they say to do?” No, they have their journey, you have your journey, walk your path.

For Participant 2, a critical component of embracing his journey is predicated on the close connection that he has shared with God since childhood. Participant 2 not only acknowledged that each person has their own journey, but he also advised each person to walk their own path.

Participant 3's narrative took the notion of “walking one's own path” literally when an argument between him and his mother over him being gay resulted in his mother kicking him out of their home. Participant 3 shared:

At that point it was very much living at home, up to my mid-twenties, I was living at home and trying to keep the façade. Oh yeah, totally dating women. Oh, uh, I don't have



time for a girlfriend right now. It was still very much trying to discover who I was while still hiding behind who I was expected to be.

Participant 3 was expected “to do as normal guys do,” and dating women was required.

However, being kicked out of his home became an opportunity for him to process where he had been, who he was beneath the façade, and who he really is as a gay man.

Unlike Participants 1, 2, and 3, Participant 4 spoke of journey figuratively. When asked about how he has found meaning in life outside of the church, Participant 4 replied:

“Life is a journey. Life is life. Every day is different. I don’t really think about it.”

When asked for additional information, Participant 4 returned to speaking about his experience with being an activist in college, meeting a partner in his early 20’s, and “getting involved in other things” prior to reindicating that “life has been a broad journey”. Participant 4 chose not to elaborate on the “other things” into which he became involved.

Even though Participant 5 did not use the journeying language, he recalled times when his lived experience required him to process pain in ways that helped him prevail, “There were a lot of things that were different about me. I remember feeling alone and I felt like there was...a tunnel and no light at the end of that tunnel.” Participant 5’s understanding of journey was influenced by his unique upbringing due to his parents being born and raised outside of the U.S., while he and his siblings are first-generation U.S. citizens. On the one hand, Participant 5 felt that he and his siblings got to carve their own path(s). On the other hand, Participant 5’s lived experience evoked strong feelings of isolation because his experience felt very singular as compared to his peers, all of whom were born and raised in the U.S.

Participant 6 focused his discussion of journeying on differences in opinion between him and a family member who contributed to his lived experience. Participant 6 stated:

I have a few things that always stand out to me: One was my father always had this refrain with me. It was something about normal. The implication was normal boys being interested in girls. That was a constant thing. He was often always probing me to get me to confirm I was interested in girls, which of course I never confirmed for him.

Participant 6 communicated that people on both sides of his family are extremely religious and conservative. As he grew and began to understand what it meant to be gay, he found himself become disenchanted with his church's teachings. With every participant, the church, religion, or a relationship with someone else remained a poignant moment when going on life's journey involved reflecting on lived experience and processing pain.

### **Category II: Belonging to a Community**

In each instance, participants discussed relationships formed with others that helped make it easier for them to proceed through the ebb and flow of life's journey. For instance, Participants 1, 2, and 6 mentioned having spouses that have helped them realize the beauty of connectedness with another person. Even though participant 3 has a husband, who he mentioned is one of a few people with whom he could open up, it was the friends he made in his early twenties that first made him feel "at home" after the argument he had with his mother. He explained:

Words have power, choose your words wisely, and that that is something that happened me develop and find who I was throughout my twenties. It's what honestly has allowed me to be the best version of myself, and by doing so, I started forming more meaningful, intimate relationships with like uh, people that aren't family by blood or relatives (anything like that), because those people know me from my authentic self and not what I'm putting up as a façade.

The ability to cultivate positive relationships was possible for participant 3 without needing to be affiliated with a church. Participants 4 and 5 focused primarily on their friends' ability to support them when they are down and/or be open with them unconditionally.

Participant 4 spoke most candidly about how his sense of community revolved around the church. Participant 4 is a minister, and he equates being a good minister with creating, sharing,

and maintaining space for people to gather and be their whole selves. In every instance noted, community is not only that which occurs within proximity. Rather, community is the result of each person finding people with whom they can relate and live life, authentically.

### **Category III: Living Unapologetically**

Every participant spoke very adamantly about the importance of being resilient, finding and using one's critical voice and choice, along with creating a transformed self-image from childhood. Participant 1 became able to live unapologetically when he recognized the role that spirituality and sexuality have in identity formation.

Participant 1 opined:

Oh, sure it is. It has to be. Identity... if you're gonna totally be the person that you are, your sexuality is a part of that. You can't pretend to be something else and walk with God. You have to be transparent. It's certainty, you know, it's me being able to come to terms with that. I wouldn't be able to take baby steps forward, had I not been open about who I am. It's been a weight taken off of me, so identity means you have to be your entire self in order to claim that term. You know?

Participant 1 felt walking with God meant he needed to be open, honest, and transparent with himself. Throughout his interview, he explained that even though the experience of going to an affirming Pentecostal church and being married to a man is new to and for him, he is ready to continue progressing in quest toward being his whole self.

Participant 2 took a very pragmatically driven approach pertaining to what it means to live unapologetically. When asked when he first realized what it meant to live wholly, he recounted, "Having the freedom to be who I was created to be and to develop a relationship, a marriage, and someone to share that with, which I never experienced before."

Participant 2 cited his move to Indianapolis and marriage to his first husband as the moments when he knew that God is using him for a "special purpose," and that he is able and free to experience all that life has to offer. He said:

Well, I can honestly say, these people were not met in a church. Far and away from it. They've kinda helped me along and understand my own boundaries—what is socially okay in private, and public.

Participant 3 said that his friends helped him determine what is acceptable versus unacceptable and gave him the space to begin to develop positive, empowering relationships. These relationships have occurred without a church affiliation. In common with Participant 3, Participant 6 has found meaning in his relationships without being affiliated with a church, particularly with the household he has formed with his husband and his son. The relationships he has formed with his husband and son are of utmost importance to him and representative of his values. Regarding values, Participant 6 exclaimed:

Once you figure out your values, you can find a spiritual connection. So, I guess that would be my advice: explore the world, explore history, explore culture, and all of the ways humans are trying to answer these fundamental questions in their various ways. That will help you understand what resonates with you and your values, and then you can kinda go from there.

Participant 6 maintained that the conditions to live without shame and guilt are created once a person takes accountability for their own growth and cognitive development.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore, describe, and explain how lived experiences have affected the development of six gay males' gender/sexual, religious/spiritual identities, and their desire to affiliate with a Pentecostal church. Unique to this study was that every participant was affiliated with Pentecostal churches at some point in their lives. Additionally, every participant was exposed to thoughts, feelings, and actions that contributed to their departure from their original church communities in search of opportunities to form identities that were most applicable to and genuine for them. Kolysch (2017) used the terms integration and distinction to describe strategies taken toward identity formation and Christianity. *Integration* occurs when

one's gay and Christian identities are reconciled to where both are able to exist concurrently and in their fullness. Golomski (2020) employed integration as a cornerstone for illustrating how participants at the Ark of Joy church in South Africa are able to experience God fully, despite how they might identify on the sexuality spectrum.

On the other hand, distinction is understood as those instances when the sexuality and religious portions of one's identity are to remain separate (Kolysch, 2017). Distinction is likely a contributing factor for three participants' decision to form alternative communities with others outside of their original Pentecostal church and/or beyond religion. Although each person was able to come to terms with their identity, a review of their transcripts illuminated many instances when choosing to uplift one's identity may have come at a cost. Nevertheless, Klinken (2019) equates relationality with love and experiencing wholeness. The six participants who were gracious enough to share their stories with us reinforced that cultivating wholeness is a journey.

### **Clinical and Practice Implications**

Furcation of individuals' identities can have significant psychosocial impacts. Not only does identity conflict contribute to mental health concerns directly, experiences of intersectional acceptance and positive intersectional experiences can positively impact individuals' mood (Jackson et al., 2020). As such, it is critical for clinicians who engage with clients who encounter a conflict between their religious/spiritual tradition and their sexual orientation identity to assist their clients with reducing the dissonance they experience. Of utmost importance is that clinicians recognize the magnitude such conflicts can have for individuals. Both religious/spiritual identities and sexual orientation identities are central components of many individuals' identities and clinicians must be attuned to both areas. As noted previously, many LGBTQIA+ individuals feel society and religious/spiritual norms force them to have to choose

between core aspects of themselves and clinicians need to ensure they are not reinforcing such messaging through actions that can be perceived as suggesting clients need to choose one identity or the other. Instead, clinicians need to work with clients to see the possibility of their identities coexisting in a positive manner.

Several clinical approaches may work well for these clients. Relational-cultural theory-based interventions seek to assist clients with building positive social connections with supportive individuals and counteracting shame-inducing narratives in order to foster growth and a sense of self-worth. Flores and Sheely-Moore (2020) advocated for the use of such interventions when working with LGBTQ+ college students to counteract prevailing heterosexism and isolation and shame related to their sexual orientation identity, both of which are common experiences among religious/spiritual LGBTQ+ individuals.

Another approach, narrative therapy, can be used to help clients to integrate disparate parts of their identities. Narrative therapy works by helping clients to reassert control over their life narratives and counteract oppression and has been suggested as a tool for working with LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing familial rejection (Jordan, 2020). When used with religious/spiritual LGBTQ+ individuals, narrative therapy can help clients to accentuate the positive components of their religious/spiritual experiences such as community and love while creating a counternarrative that allows for the co-existence of a religious/spiritual connection and an LGBTQIA+ identity.

Bibliotherapy or cinematherapy, in which clients expose themselves to readings and teachings that counteract prevailing narratives through interpretations of scriptures and other doctrine that are inclusive and supportive of LGBTQIA+ identities, may also be beneficial for some clients. While research regarding its use for integrating religion/spirituality and LGBTQ+

identities, bibliotherapy has been used to enhance resiliency, build social support, and counteract internalized heterosexism among individuals who come out as LGBTQIA+ later in life (Carpenter et al., 2017). While not well researched to date, forgiveness-based therapies may be beneficial for LGBTQIA+ clients who have experienced spiritual or moral injury. Focused on helping clients to forgive past offenses and move forward, forgiveness-based therapies may resonate with religious/spiritual LGBTQIA+ clients as many religious and spiritual traditions emphasize forgiveness. Two studies have suggested that forgiveness-based therapy can help LGBTQIA+ individuals' psychosocial functioning through a reduction in anger toward others for their offenses and toward themselves for internalized shame (Charles, 2013; Unsal & Bozo, 2023). It is important to emphasize, however, that forgiveness-based therapy is not based on an acceptance of victimization, but rather on helping the victimized individual to process their experiences in a way that leads to self-growth.

More specific to this study, the Fellowship of Reconciling Pentecostals International is a network of affirming Pentecostal churches and ministers that are supportive of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Their website provides a directory that LGBTQIA+ Pentecostal individuals can consult to find supportive individuals within the Pentecostal tradition. Moving outside organized religion, Winder (2015) documented how community-based organizations can integrate practices such as call and response and "shouting" within programming targeting gay individuals who have experienced anti-gay messaging within their faith traditions. By incorporating practices that many associate with their connections to God and expressions of their faith, these organizations can provide a home for individuals in which they experience emotional and spiritual fellowship in an environment that is accepting and uplifting. On an individual level, social workers can assist clients with identifying such resources within their areas; on a meso level, social workers

can become more educated about faith-based organizations by participating in meet and greets, facility tours, and “lunch and learn” sessions. On a more macro level, social workers can assist with advancing the mission and reach of such organizations.

### **Limitations**

Although this study un- and recovered narratives, voices, and experiences of those who often remain unheard, there are important limitations that must be noted. First, the study only featured six participants. Even though Cunningham and Carmichael (2017) indicate that six participants can be featured in a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the study’s findings are not generalizable. Secondly, the study lacked diverse racial and ethnic representation. Only one participant identified as Black/African American. There might be particular barriers faced by those who identify as Black, gay male, and Christian that need to be amplified by researchers and participants in future studies. Another limitation is that only the lead and third researchers participated in analyzing the data; we acknowledge the likelihood that more insights would have been garnered if the second researcher were able to participate in that component of the study. Additional limitations were that two participants were unavailable for member-checking, and our study only included men who have had affiliations with the Pentecostal tradition.

Our study’s limitations are opportunities to plant seeds for future research. Future researchers should obtain more diverse representation, including Black/African American individuals and women. It would be advantageous for future researchers to examine the lived experiences of those who have spent time in Pentecostal churches and who identify as genderqueer, transgender, transsexual, and nonbinary. Lastly, research has shown that other denominations within the Protestant tradition likely have members who might facing moral and spiritual injuries to varying degrees because of their sexuality and religiosity. Future researchers



must use what has been shown in research as a clarion call to survey other Protestant denominations and traditions to determine whether there are any trends in how the Protestant church responds to helping its members progress on their quest toward wholeness.

### **Conclusion**

The quest toward wholeness is all encompassing. This study has shown that wholeness can take many forms; deciding with whom to share one's life is one among the many decisions that might be made in an attempt to cultivate wholeness. Love is love. However, our study demonstrated that love comes at a cost for some churches in the Pentecostal tradition. Half of the participants showed that the price to pay to be a member of a Pentecostal church was not worth the benefit. As a result, they made the choice to seek cohesion outside of church and even outside religion in some instances.

Identity is one area where costs and benefits should not be weighed; a person should not have to choose their sexuality over their spirituality, or vice versa. Having to make a choice of that magnitude is a social and spiritual injustice, which can negatively impact one's quest toward wholeness and identity formation. Yet, our participants showed us that wholeness became their reality when they formed identities that are uniquely and holistically their own. If Pentecostal churches seek to share space and form communities with gay males, religious leaders and congregants must understand that negating one's true self may not be worth the expense of following Jesus' call to "deny oneself, pick up one's cross, and follow me" (New Revised Standard Version, 1989/2022).

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the participants and reviewers who welcomed us into their worlds and enabled us to learn from and with them. Our work would not have been possible without your time, insights, and care.

**Disclosure Statement**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Berg, G. (2011). The relationship between spiritual distress, PTSD, and depression in Vietnam combat veterans. *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 65(1), 1–11.
- Carpenter, B. C., Redcay, A., & Freeman, A. (2017). Tools for enhancing resilience and addressing internalized heterosexism: Bibliotherapy and cinematherapy in groupwork for individuals who come out as an adult. *Groupwork*, 27(3).
- Charles, M. W. (2013) *Effects of a forgiveness intervention on lesbian and gay adolescents hurt by homophobia* (Publication No. 1524723154) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). SAGE Publishing.
- Cohen, D. & Crabtree, B. (2006). *Qualitative Research Guidelines Project*.  
<http://www.qualres.org/HomeLinc-3684.htm>
- Conron, K. J., Goldberg, S. K., & O’Neill, K. (October 2020). *Religiosity among LGBT adults in the US*. UCLA School of Law-Williams Institute, 1-28.
- Covington, L. R. A. (2019, November 1-November 3). *Examining faith: The inclusion of the spiritually traumatized LGBTQ believer of color in affirming and inclusive ministries* [paper presentation]. Religious Education Association Annual Meeting 2019, Toronto, Ontario.
- Crockett, J. E., Cashwell, C. S., Marszalek, J. F., & Willis, B. T. (2017). Phenomenological inquiry of identity development, same-sex attraction, and religious upbringing. *Counseling and Values*, 63, 91-109.

- Cunningham, N. & Carmichael, T. (2017, June 22-23). *Sampling, interviewing, and coding: Lessons from a constructivist grounded theory study* [paper presentation]. 16<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies, Dublin, Ireland.
- Daniels, J. E. (2004). Biographical sketches of elderly African American women in later life. *Journal of Women & Aging, 16*(3/4), 169–178.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005a). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-42). SAGE Publishing.
- Flores, C. A., & Sheely-Moore, A. I. (2020). Relational-cultural theory–based interventions with LGBTQ college students. *Journal of College Counseling, 23*(1), 71-84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jocc.12150>
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge
- Golomski, C. (2020). Countermythologies: Queer lives in a southern African gay and lesbian Pentecostal church. *Transforming Anthropology, 2*, 156-169.
- Hanley-Maxwell, C., Al Hano, I., & Skivington, M. (2007). Qualitative Research in Rehabilitation Counseling. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 50*(2), 99-110.
- Harris, J. I., Erbes, C. R., Engdahl, B. E., Ogden, H., Olson, R. H., Winskowski, A. M. Campion, K., & Mataas, S. (2012). Religious distress and coping with stressful life events: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 68*(12), 1276–1286.
- Hart, D., Brew, L., & Pope, M. (2018). In search of meaning: A preliminary typology of gay male spiritual identity development. *American Counseling Association, 64*, 35-52.

- Jackson, S. D., Mohr, J. J., Sarno, E. L., Kindahl, A. M., & Jones, I. L. (2020). Intersectional experiences, stigma-related stress, and psychological health among Black LGBTQ individuals. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 88*(5), 416-428.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000489>
- Jinkerson, J. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology, 22*(2), 122–130.
- Jordan, F. (2020). Changing the narrative for LGBTQ adolescents: A literature review and call for research into narrative therapy to improve family acceptance of LGBTQ teens. *Counseling and Family Therapy Scholarship Review, 3*(1), Article 6.  
<https://doi.org/10.53309/raqx6953>
- Klän, W. R. A. (2018). ‘He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds’ (Ps 147:3): Perspectives on pastoral care. *Aosis, 1*-10.
- Klinken, A. V. (2015). Queer love in a “Christian Nation”: Zambian gay men negotiating sexual and religious identities. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 83*(4), 947-964.
- Kolysch, S. (2017). Straight gods, White devils: Exploring paths to non-religion in the lives of Black LGBTQ people. *Secularism & Nonreligion, 6*(2), 1-13.
- Pew Research Center (2015). “America’s changing religious landscape.”  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>
- Pew Research Center (2019). “In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at rapid pace.”  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

- Pingel, E. S. & Bauermeister, J. A. (2018). 'Church hurt can be the worst hurt': Community stakeholder perceptions of the role of Black churches in HIV prevention among young Black gay and bisexual men. *Culture, health, & Sexuality*, 20(2), 218-231.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Shay, J. (2014). Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31(2), 82–191.
- Starnino, V., Sullivan, W. P., Angel, C. T., & Davis, L. W. (2019). Moral injury, coherence, and spiritual repair. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(1), 99-114.
- Stein, N. R., Mills, M. A., Arditte, K., Mendoza, C., Borah, A. M., Resick, P. A., Litz, B.T. & the STRONG STAR Consortium. (2012). A scheme for categorizing traumatic military events. *Behavior Modification*, 36, 787–807.
- The New Revised Standard Bible. (2022). New Revised Standard Bible Online. (Original work published 1989). <https://biblia.com/books/nrsv/Mt16.24>
- Ünsal, B. C., & Bozo, Ö. (2023). Minority stress and mental health of gay men in Turkey: The mediator roles of shame and forgiveness of self. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 70(8), 1503-1520.
- Wasson, D. & Hess, P. (1989). Foster parents as child welfare educators. *Public Welfare*, 47, 16-22.
- Weaver, M. J. & Brakke, D. (2009). *Introduction to Christianity* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Winder, T. J. A. (2015). "Shouting it out": Religion and the development of Black gay identities. *Qualitative Sociology*, 38(4), 375-394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-015-9316-1>
- Wood, A. W. & Conley, A. H. (2013). Loss of religious or spiritual identities among the LGBT population. *Counseling and Values*, 59, 1-17.