

WE'RE ONA...NOW WHAT?: AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF HOSPITALITY
EMPHASIZING LGBTQ PERSPECTIVES

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DAN DE LEON

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WE'RE ONA...NOW WHAT?: AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF HOSPITALITY
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APPROVED BY

THESIS PROJECT COMMITTEE:

Dr. Steve V. Sprinkle, Associate Professor of Practical Theology and
Director of Field Education and Supervised Ministry
Director

Dr. Russell W. Dalton, Associate Professor of Christian Education
Reader

Dr. Jeffrey Williams, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs,
Institutional Effectiveness Officer and Assistant Professor of
American Religious History
Reader

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ABSTRACT

Project Director: Dr. Steve V. Sprinkle. This project proposes that focusing on hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives within Open & Affirming churches will enable those congregations to more adequately engage LGBTQ people to whom it extends welcome. The research applies a spirituality of hospitality model to ecclesiology, attempting to bridge disconnections between hetero and queer people sharing one congregational setting. From 11 interviews with LGBTQ people in the Austin and Bryan-College Station areas and priestly listening by an ONA church, this project draws practical, visionary, and ongoing conclusions about how ONA congregations move from merely welcoming LGBTQ people to being affirming and hospitable toward LGBTQ people.

INTRODUCTION

In June of 2009, I attended the United Church of Christ's General Synod in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Synod is the bi-annual convention of the national UCC, which gathers the denomination's 38 conferences for three days of worship services, speakers, and workshops (The official delegates sent to Synod representing each conference stay for additional days of business meetings). Choosing a handful of workshops to attend from the scores offered is an overwhelming decision. Fortunately, there was one in particular that immediately caught my attention: "We're ONA...Now What?"¹

Friends Congregational Church, where I have served as pastor since September 1, 2005, is an ONA congregation in the Brazos Valley, and it is the only ONA church in the Bryan-College Station area. Friends Church has been ONA since adopting its own statement to this effect in 1996.² At that time the congregation was facing the possibility of having to close its doors due to inadequate membership and

¹ ONA is the acronym used by the UCC to denote that a congregation within its denomination is "Open and Affirming." This definition of ONA is taken from the UCC website at <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.html>: "To say that a setting of the UCC (a local church, campus ministry, etc.) is 'Open and Affirming' means that it has publicly declared that 'lesbian, gay, bisexual' (LGB) people (or those of all 'sexual orientations') are welcome in its full life and ministry (e.g. membership, leadership, employment, etc.). It bespeaks a spirit of hospitality and a willingness to live out that welcome in meaningful ways. Transgender people or gender identity and gender expression is increasingly included in ONA declarations, statements or policies."

² The Friends Church ONA Statement can be found on the church's website here: http://www.friends-ucc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=59.

funds. The ONA statement, however, provided Friends with an influx of new membership ranging from LGBTQ individuals and families to heterosexual individuals and families where the parents desired to raise their children in a church environment that intentionally sought to include everyone.³ The diversity that has been ushered in to Friends Congregational Church since 1996 raises a question that I feel our congregation has yet to candidly ask itself: What do we do with the blessed consequences of being an ONA church for 14 years? Since the doors of our church have been opened to a diverse body of Christ that does not (and to a large extent cannot) exist anywhere else in our community, as our church's pastor, I am compelled to ask, "What purposeful actions are we taking together to affirm and nurture that diversity?" In other words, "We're ONA...now what?"

These were the questions I carried with me into that afternoon's workshop, but they went largely unanswered. Going around the room of roughly 20 people, we workshop participants introduced ourselves and shared our ministerial context. Most of the participants represented churches that were either just entering into discussions on whether to become ONA, or that had been such for two years or less. Given that Friends Church is located in a highly conservative area of Texas, I was shocked to discover that, of the churches gathered in the room, Friends had been an ONA congregation for the longest period of time by far. In fact, upon stating that our

³ LGBTQ stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.' Note that the UCC's ONA definition does not assume to include T (transgender) or Q (queer) people in its wide description of UCC churches' respective definitions of ONA.

church had been ONA since 1996, I received wide-eyed looks from my fellow participants that ranged from disbelief to envy. The workshop sought to provide ONA congregations with helpful steps toward making that identity more visible in their respective communities. While I was looking for ways to nurture the church family that had culminated in response to our congregation's ONA Statement, the workshop was offering tools for evangelism and outreach: "We're ONA, now how do we make sure the community around us knows that?"

Exploring culture and ministry from a Christian perspective, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, "The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people."⁴ Following that suggestion, when it comes to furthering the evangelistic intent of Friends Church's ONA identity, our congregation must be purposeful about nurturing the community within its walls that has responded to that inclusive invitation in the first place. Those who curiously come to an ONA church seeking God the Redeemer will do so by observing the appearance, attitude, and actions of the community within that church's walls. If this community is not as hospitable as it is welcoming to those to whom it has attempted to reach out by the nature of its ONA identity, then those who have come in response to an evangelistic invitation will likely not stay. Neglecting to nurture the community that has come together as a

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 94.

consequence of our ONA identity results in missed opportunities where we might have pointed to the Redeemer.

In this Doctor of Ministry study, I pose that question raised by the Synod workshop to Friends Congregational Church: “We’re ONA...now what?” However, I tailor the question to Friends and its surrounding community of Bryan-College Station. The theory here, in short, is that by engaging in hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives within our congregational community, Friends Church will discover more about the experiences, outlooks, needs, and gifts of our LGBTQ siblings. By applying those discoveries to the evangelistic pronouncement of being an ONA church, Friends might bridge much of the disconnect that exists between it as a congregation and the LGBTQ people it hopes to reach in the community, as well as all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, who might identify with and/or respond to the church’s ONA Statement.

It is the vision of Friends Church “to offer God’s extravagant welcome to all.”⁵ As I have suggested to our congregation from the pulpit on occasion, we need to move from merely offering God’s extravagant welcome to all to offering God’s extravagant hospitality to all. Attending to congregational culture and thereby our community’s diversity is Friends Church’s specific answer to the question that I believe any ONA church should ask of itself on a frequent basis: “We’re ONA...now what?” While the following chapters seek to answer this question, they do not

⁵ Found at this link to the Friends Church website under “Our Vision and Mission”: http://www.friends-ucc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1.

presume to reach a perfect and final conclusion. What is offered in this study instead is a process whereby Friends Church and other ONA congregations might embrace a posture of hospitality to all people.⁶ The process is ongoing, never final; and the posture, like the Body of Christ, is in constant need of attention, reevaluation, and reconciliation for the sake of the whole church and the surrounding community it strives to love and serve. Hospitality is not an act or a series of acts, but an ongoing discipline. As Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt suggest in their book, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, "It is a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice *and* a path to a deeper spirituality."⁷ Thus, the process offered here begins by unpacking hospitality in terms of spirituality and then explains how this is applied to ecclesiology.

Drawing from the experience of the late Catholic theologian and prolific writer on all things spiritual, Henri J. M. Nouwen, I examine a spirituality of hospitality as laid out in his book, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. Emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives, this portion of the study serves as homage to

⁶ When it comes to churches adopting statements or official stances that reflect a purposeful outreach to and inclusion of LGBT people, the United Church of Christ has the title of being ONA, but the UCC is not alone in this capacity. Therefore, I do not wish to be exclusionary by offering this study for only ONA churches. In this same capacity, certain Baptist churches have declared that they are "Welcoming and Affirming;" Presbyterian churches are "More Light;" Methodist churches are "Reconciling;" Disciples of Christ churches are "GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Affirming Disciples);" Catholic churches are "Dignity" churches; and Lutheran churches have an organization called "Lutherans Concerned," to name a few.

⁷ Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), 5.

Nouwen whose experience, I contend, may have been cut short by his death at such a young age (I expand on this connection in Chapter One). Nouwen's spirituality of hospitality suggests that we promote spaces where listening and learning are emphasized. "When we practice genuine listening, we avoid treating the other's story as devoid of God's grace."⁸ Such receptivity informs our perception and understanding of others, thereby deepening our spirituality:

When we are willing to detach ourselves from making our own limited experience the criterion for our approach to others, we may be able to see that life is greater than our life, history is greater than our history, experience greater than our experience and God greater than our God. That is the poverty of heart that makes a good host. With poverty of heart we can receive the experiences of others as a gift to us. Their histories can creatively connect with ours, their lives give new meaning to ours, and their God speaks to ours in mutual revelation.⁹

Attempting to adopt Nouwen's suggested "poverty of heart," this study includes a series of 11 interviews conducted in offices, bars, restaurants, and coffee shops in the Bryan, College Station, and Austin areas with 12 individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. The experiences disclosed by the interviewees on matters of identity, inclusion, authenticity, and ecclesiology are heard and recorded as gifts that offer vital insight and revelation on how we might come to understand hospitality at Friends Church.

⁸ D. Mark Davis, *Talking About Evangelism: A Congregational Resource* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 73.

⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Fount of Harper Collins, 1997), 78.

A question arises here as to where the voices heard in those interviews are found in the pages of scripture, or where those voices have been squelched throughout the history of the church by exclusivist interpretations of biblical texts. The ONA congregation, even with the best of intentions, might overlook the perspectives of LGBTQ people throughout the story of God if the scriptural vantage point is informed through the lens of hyper-masculine, patriarchal authority and heterosexist oppression, a lens through which the Bible has been read for centuries. In his book, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, Robert Goss points out that queer sexual theologies have begun to concentrate on several questions, one of which is “rereading the biblical texts and the Christian tradition from a queer perspective.”¹⁰ (This study elaborates further on ‘queer reading’ and ‘queer biblical criticism’ in Chapter Five.) Goss explains:

In reading the gospel stories of Jesus from their own perspective, queer Christians build up their personal identification with Jesus’ actions of God’s reign. They repeat the open prototypes in their own lives, addressing the exigencies of contemporary homophobic/misogynist oppressions. Queer Christians discover that the God Jesus preached is, in fact, also the God of queers. These texts when prayed, contemplated, or imaginatively envisioned empower queer discipleship in following Jesus the freedom fighter.¹¹

In an effort to include the perspectives shared in the interviews, this study reexamines Joshua 2 and Luke 7:36-50 utilizing queer biblical criticism. Both of these texts offer stories that reveal the nature of hospitality. Understanding these texts in light of

¹⁰ Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

LGBTQ perspectives shapes how a congregation preaches and teaches those stories, and thereby informs the extent to which the church demonstrates hospitality to LGBTQ people and, as a consequence, I contend, all people.

Following the cyclical nature of practical theology, questions are posed to the ONA congregation: Reading excerpts from the interviews and hearing the voices of individuals who identify as LGBTQ in and around our community, what do you hear from these voices? If God is found at the margins of society and LGBTQ people's lived experience exists there, then what gifts are these evangelists, these harbingers of good news from the Divine, bringing to the Church, to the world? If we in the United Church of Christ proclaim that "God is still speaking," then what messages from this still-speaking God are missing from our interpretations of Scripture, and how are those interpretations affecting our hospitality toward one another or lack thereof? As Richard Osmer suggests in his book *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, "These questions lie at the heart of the normative task of practical theological interpretation."¹²

In a culture that is obsessed with competition, consumption and territory, offering space where we can listen to and learn from others and to then connect those experiences with our own is not a readily accepted idea. As Homan and Pratt bemoan, "Living life in a way that places a higher value on relationships and community than it does on commerce and productivity—this is counter to how most of us have been

¹² Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 8.

taught.”¹³ Through the highly individualized mediums of cable news, emails, text messages, Tweets, and Facebook, we are led to believe that we are the crafters of our own destiny; we have the power to choose our own narrative and shape our own reality. This self-absorbed, self-indulgent outlook tends to seep into our churches, making it difficult to hear scriptural commands from the prophets and Jesus as anything more than far-fetched idealism. However, we cannot walk humbly with God unless we also do justice on one another’s behalf and love mercy toward each other, and we cannot demonstrate to the world that we are Christ’s disciples unless we follow Jesus’ mandate of loving one another.¹⁴ I propose that the spiritual discipline that has the power to uproot humanity from the individualized reality of apathy, indifference, and fear and to firmly plant us in God’s reality of abundance, righteousness, and love is hospitality. Hospitality has the power to deepen our spirituality and make us *see* one another, and to consequently cherish and serve one another, just as the Good Samaritan *saw* the nameless victim, who was left robbed, beaten, and bloodied on that Jericho road.¹⁵ I offer this study as a process by which one ONA church might take the proposals of Nouwen’s spirituality and apply them to an ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives. Such a process, I pray, might have the ability to radically and powerfully articulate the Mission of

¹³ Homan & Pratt, xxv.

¹⁴ Micah 6:8 and John 13:34.

¹⁵ Luke 10:25-37.

Friends Congregational Church: "...to seek a deeper spirituality, and to help transform God's world, one act of love at a time."¹⁶

¹⁶ Found at this link to the Friends Church website under "Our Vision and Mission": http://www.friends-ucc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1.

CHAPTER ONE: HOSPITALITY AND LGBTQ EXPERIENCES

“They Have Different Needs,” by St. John of the Cross

*Some seeds beneath the earth
Are dormant.*

*They fell the last time the cool air
Turned the leaves
Gold.*

*Those seeds have different needs than we do;
Let them go about their life
Completely unharmed by your views.*

*We have cracked open, we sensed
Even beneath the earth—
The holy was near,*

*And are reaching up to know
And claim
Light*

*As our
Self.¹⁷*

Defining Hospitality

We started a ministry of Friends Congregational Church in February of 2009 called Theology on Tap that meets at a pub in Bryan on Tuesday evenings.¹⁸ The

¹⁷ St. John of the Cross, “They Have Different Needs,” trans. Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2002), 312.

eclectic group of intergenerational, interracial, straight and gay women and men, making up a core group of eight to ten people, gather around a table each week to be in fellowship with one another and discuss various topics. As I am often the facilitator for these gatherings, I have drawn some discussion topics of late from my doctoral project's reading list, all of which deal with hospitality.

In her book on hospitality and early Christianity, *And You Welcomed Me*, Amy Oden writes, "At the very least, hospitality is the welcoming of the stranger."¹⁹ Bringing this basic definition to the table, I suggested that our group needed a shared concept of the stranger. If we cannot identify the stranger, then we have no idea to whom we are called to extend a welcome. Oden asserts that the common thread throughout the ancient biblical texts regarding the stranger is that they are all vulnerable populations.²⁰ She writes, "Early Christians refer to 'the captive,' 'those in bonds,' 'prisoners,' and 'slaves' as vulnerable people in need of hospitality."²¹ Homan and Pratt add, "Hospitality, as it has been practiced from ancient days,

¹⁸ Theology on Tap is not an original title. I adopted the title from previous formats like it that I had heard of across the country. The following Wiki page excerpt describes Theology on Tap as "a program of lectures sponsored by a number of local Catholic dioceses. The lectures, which are often given by noted spiritual leaders and religious academics, address current topics in religion and theology, and are notable and sometimes controversial for their venue, which is normally a parish center, a bar or restaurant. The concept has become common among other Christian Denominations, particularly Episcopalians, Lutherans, Anglicans, and some Presbyterian and Methodist churches" (Accessed 1 February 2011 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theology_on_Tap).

¹⁹ Amy G. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

protected people from the dangers of traveling alone.”²² Starting from this point, I urged our group to name “the vulnerable” and those most exposed to danger in our present day society in an effort to then discuss the details of a hospitable welcome.

What ensued was curious: the group began determining vulnerability based on people’s needs, and hospitality was understood in this respect as meeting those needs. As the conversation continued down this path, the list of vulnerable people grew more and more extensive. College students, single people, the elderly, the deaf, people struggling with PTSD, and so forth, were deemed vulnerable. This was coupled with an anxiousness to meet all of these perceived needs in an effort to culminate an authentic welcome to the vulnerable, and, therefore, authentic hospitality to the stranger. As the group began to realize the impossibility of meeting such criteria for hospitality, there was an unspoken sense of frustration and perhaps even some dashed hopes. Entering into this conversation we helped reveal to each other the impossible expectations we have of the Church to be a utopian resource in which and through which all human needs are met by some fabled welcome. However, Oden writes, “Taken as a feature of Christian life, hospitality is not so much a singular act of welcome as it is a way, an orientation that attends to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring.”²³

²² Homan & Pratt, 11.

²³ Oden, 14.

With respect to being an ONA congregation, Friends Church might appear solidly orientated toward welcoming the LGBTQ community. Adopting an ONA Statement and supporting that statement with a vision of “offering God’s extravagant welcome to all” gives each member of Friends Church a clear, unified understanding that we are devoted to inclusiveness and a purposeful welcome. However, when held up as a feature of Christian life, as Oden puts it, this largely misses the mark if it is only about acts of welcome and not about a consistent posture of hospitality that gives attention to listening to and learning from our LGBTQ neighbors.

The late Catholic theologian and eclectic spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, writes:

We are always in search of a community that can offer us a sense of belonging, but it is important to realize that being together in one place, one house, one city, or one country is only secondary to the fulfillment of our legitimate desire.²⁴

Nouwen speaks here, specifically, of humanity’s desire to be in relationship with the otherness of God.²⁵ To ease the anxious concerns of the Theology on Tap group here, no human being is capable of fulfilling that legitimate desire in another person, and to attempt to do so would be the foolhardy sin of which we are all guilty more often than we acknowledge: making ourselves believe that we are God and, therefore, that we

²⁴ Nouwen, 25.

²⁵ In Nouwen’s own words from *Reaching Out*, 79-80: “It indeed belongs to the core of the Christian message that God did not reveal himself to us as the powerful other, unapproachable in his omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. Instead he came to us in Jesus Christ who ‘did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself...and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).”

can provide for all of our deepest desires by our own individual actions. However, making an extravagant welcome secondary to extravagant hospitality charges a congregation to be orientated toward attending to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring. This reflects the abundant love of God. It may not fulfill the legitimate desires of which Nouwen writes, but hospitality does more to remove obstructions to those desires than does a mere welcome. He continues:

If we expect any salvation, redemption, healing and new life, the first thing we need is an open receptive place where something can happen to us. Hospitality, therefore, is such an important attitude. We cannot change the world by a new plan, project or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice and proposals, but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own centre.²⁶

In other words, hospitality is a feature of Christian life that is more orientated toward reconciling, nurturing, and strengthening community than are acts of welcome, whose purposes are directed toward simply compiling community or gathering the faithful.

Hospitality, therefore, is not an act, nor is it a series of acts; rather, hospitality is, as Oden suggests, an orientation or a way. Homan and Pratt elaborate:

Hospitality is the way we learn to really love; it is the way out of our own brooding fears and broken hearts...It is not a comforting thing for the future of our race that we discuss simple human relations as if we are doing quantum physics. Just as a person with a healthy digestive system doesn't talk about it, people with healthy relationships don't make a fuss over it, they just live a certain way.²⁷

²⁶ Nouwen, 52-53.

²⁷ Homan & Pratt, 30.

When applied to the invitation from Jesus in John's gospel, hospitality becomes a way that strives toward the fulfillment of our legitimate desire: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Understood in terms of ecclesiological life, hospitality becomes a way by which the Church seeks the abundant love of God, and that way values without compromise the otherness of the stranger. This is perhaps the highest hurdle for churches to leap over when it comes to how we are perceived by LGBTQ people.

Comforting the Afflicted: Hospitality to LGBTQ People

Our culture is staunchly heterosexist, and, to a degree mostly unattainable by even the most purposefully empathetic hetero people, this is vividly evident to LGBTQ people.²⁸ Tragically, this is also evident to LGBTQ people in how they perceive the Church. Consequently, the LGBTQ identity is the otherness lacking from the ecclesial outlook, which results in the Body of Christ suffering incompleteness and, consequently, God's glory being withheld. Nouwen writes, "In our world the assumption is that strangers are a potential danger and that it is up to them to disprove

²⁸ A definition of 'heterosexism' according to Linda Goldman in *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*, 14: "Heterosexism is 'the discrimination or prejudice by heterosexuals against homosexuals' (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2006). It is a belief system that male-female sexuality is the only natural, normal, or moral mode of sexual behavior and this idea results in a reinforcement of stigma and power differentials associated with this belief."

it.”²⁹ Sadly, this worldly view often seeps into the ecclesial sphere. In his book, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, Arthur Sutherland writes:

Although it is important to give priority first and foremost to divine love, it seems entirely unlikely to me that anything short of the admission that all people are aliens and strangers to God will ever be able to bring about the reconciliation with one another that our world needs.³⁰

Hospitality that is attentive to our mutual estrangement from God and subsequent redemption by and to God would work to dismantle assumptions of hostility, and it could offer reconciliation to the tragically broken perspectives of our LGBTQ neighbors who are in constant need of safety. Oden elaborates:

As a witness to God’s grace and love, hospitality both welcomes and empowers people. Hospitality is a door to a grace-filled life and an expression of it. It is a form of proclamation of the good news of God’s love.³¹

Such reconciliatory hospitality is essential to the Body of Christ.

Hospitality, then, emphasizes healing. While this might be a need that every person experiences in varying degrees and at different times in their lives, LGBTQ people are particularly in need of healing from multiple fears given their experience in our heterosexist culture:

Mental health professionals are now realizing the implications of homophobia because it jeopardizes the physical and psychological welfare of an individual and violates the human rights and civil liberties of this minority. These mostly

²⁹ Nouwen, 46.

³⁰ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 37.

³¹ Oden, 298-299.

psychological attacks instill in LGBT people the notion that the dominant heterosexual community sees them as abnormal and undesirable.³²

This is not only a visible estrangement of LGBTQ people from the dominant heterosexual community; it is an inward estrangement that dismantles the very identity of the LGBTQ individual on account of self-loathing. “Internalized homophobia is the outcome of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth internalizing society’s negative ideology about sexual minorities.”³³

Expanding on the Theology on Tap discussion of vulnerable strangers and those most exposed to danger in society, Christine Pohl and Pamela Buck write in their hospitality guide titled *Making Room*, “The most vulnerable strangers are those people who are disconnected from relationships with family, church, economy, and civic community.”³⁴ Given their disconnect from each of these relationships as a consequence of their identity, LGBTQ people are among the most vulnerable strangers in our present culture, and LGBTQ people are more commonly exposed to danger in society than a majority of the population. Concerning estrangement from family, Linda Goldman notes in *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*:

³² Linda Goldman, *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society* (New York, NY: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 8-9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ Pamela J. Buck & Pohl, Christine D., *Study Guide for Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids / Cambridge, 2001), 1.

LGBT adolescents and young adults face the possibilities of being excluded by friends and family, ostracized by society and ridiculed for being unacceptable merely by acknowledging their sexual orientation or gender identity. These limitations to their lives and their “freedom to be” can manifest secrecy, depression, isolation, suicide ideation (contemplating suicide), and actual suicide.³⁵

Concerning LGBTQ people’s estrangement from church, Cheri DiNovo offers this illustration in her book, *Qu(e)rying Evangelism*, of Mary, “a transsexual (so defined, in Mary’s case, no surgery or hormones, just women’s clothes)”:

S/he had been laughed at as she tripped over the edge of a carpet in a church’s service. S/he had grown up with elders coming to her house praying for her as s/he insisted on wearing women’s clothes. It was Mary’s pastor who had suggested to her parents that she be institutionalized at thirteen.³⁶

Concerning LGBTQ people’s estrangement from economy, Sean Cahill and Sarah Tobias report the following in *Policy Issues Affecting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families*:

Same-sex couples do not enjoy the tax exemptions that married couples do with regard to gift taxes and estate taxes. Moreover, gay and lesbian partners are liable for taxes on any domestic partner benefits they receive. Finally, gay men and lesbians face obstacles in claiming their partners as dependents...Most employees enjoy, tax-free, the health insurance they and their spouse or dependents receive from their employer. Same-sex couples, however, do not qualify as spouses and normally do not qualify as dependents. The value of their domestic partner benefits, such as health insurance, is taxable income, paid by the employee. This can have significant tax consequences, even to the point of making it financially detrimental for an unmarried partner to access health benefits. For instance, if the value of the health benefits is enough to bump an employee up to the next tax bracket, they

³⁵ Goldman, 5.

³⁶ DiNovo, Cheri., *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing Community from the Outside In* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 84.

could pay more for their partner's benefits than if they acquired insurance independently.³⁷

And concerning LGBTQ people being disconnected from civic community, consider this:

Because of the way the U.S. Census allows same-sex cohabitating couples to self-identify, it misses many gay people, including those who are single, those whose partners have died, and people who are in a long-term same-sex relationship, but who are not cohabiting with their partner. Many cohabiting gay and lesbian couples may have chosen not to indicate that they were "unmarried partners" because they did not want the government to have this information. In a country where gay people were by definition criminals under the sodomy laws on the books in fifteen states until June 2003 and in which federal, state, and local governments continue to officially discriminate in many ways, this is not surprising.³⁸

Conclusively, Nouwen writes:

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.³⁹

Surely, LGBTQ people can testify to this estrangement in ways to which the hetero-founded, hetero-minded church is ignorant.

³⁷ Sean Cahill & Tobias, Sarah, *Policy Issues Affecting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 50-51.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁹ Nouwen, 43.

Afflicting the Comfortable: LGBTQ Evangelism to the Church

While the deep historical wounds of tragic heterosexist ignorance run deep, the healing balm of hospitality is beneficial to the stranger as well as to our churches that would offer it. In his book, *Hospitality: An Ecclesiological Practice of Ministry*, Freddy James Clark writes, “Hospitality, as an ecclesiological practice and a public way of life, seeks to find commonality with the woefully disconnected ‘other,’ to develop a relationship where they are perceived as equals.”⁴⁰ The mutual blessing of this practice, Homan and Pratt add, is that:

...hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human, both my humanity and that of the stranger... On life’s journey each of us is a pilgrim. We aren’t sure where we came from and where we are going. We are vulnerable and we need each other.⁴¹

Such reconciliation is activated when congregations take intentional steps to add the LGBTQ identity to ecclesiology’s narrative and outlook:

Hospitality shifts the frame of reference from self to other to relationship. This shift invariably leads to repentance, for one sees the degree to which one’s own view has become the only view... As communities become more hospitable they experience a de-centering of perspective: they become more aware of the structural inequalities that exist in and around them and repent.⁴²

⁴⁰ Freddy James Clark, *Hospitality: An Ecclesiological Practice of Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books of the Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2007), 40.

⁴¹ Homan & Pratt, 12.

⁴² Oden, 15-16.

The church that is attentive to everyone's experiences, including those of our LGBTQ neighbors, rectifies itself, relying on God's grace, into a community that listens to and learns from the full humanity of each person responding to its welcome.

Hospitality is wrongfully viewed in this context, however, as authoritative, where the church is presumed to have the ability to extend hospitality to LGBTQ people in order for *their* lives to be shared and for *their* stories to speak. Nouwen reminds us, "In the eyes and feelings of many who suffer, church buildings are perceived more as houses of power than as houses of hospitality."⁴³ We must also be reminded that Jesus Christ is the liberator, reconciler and healer, not the Church; and "as Christians we must not and cannot speak for Christ but only and ever about Christ."⁴⁴ If reconciliation and healing are to be found, if the afflicted are ever to receive comfort, then the Church must acknowledge its own vulnerability, its own complacency in the face of past and present injustices, and its own association among the comfortable whom the table-overturning Jesus would suggest must be afflicted. Then and only then can LGBTQ people's lives be seen and stories be heard in the ecclesiological sphere; and this must occur, for their lives and stories harbor the very presence of God. Clark asserts:

The institution of slavery was supported by good bible-carrying oppressors. Therefore, if the dehumanization of a race of people is to be seen as unjust, there must emerge a hermeneutic of hospitality and covenant that is against any form of injustice. The world of the oppressed and the oppressor is not the

⁴³ Nouwen, 65.

⁴⁴ DiNovo, 23.

same world... What is then needed is for oppressed people to find their voice and speak for themselves.⁴⁵

Hearing that voice of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers requires that we in the Church be conflicted in the midst of our centuries-old comfort with the cultural and societal status quo that still in many ways views LGBTQ people as less than. Karen Lebacqz underlines:

If justice begins with the correction of injustice, then the most important tools for understanding justice will be the stories of injustice as experienced by the oppressed and the tools of social and historical analysis that help to illumine the process by which those historical injustices arose and the meaning of them in the lives of the victims.⁴⁶

Although I frame this here in terms of afflicting the comforted, the lives and stories of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are not ultimately received as collective affliction; rather, for the Church, LGBTQ lives and stories are received as reconciliation, healing, and good news. They are evangelism.

In his book, *Talking About Evangelism: A Congregational Resource*, Mark Davis defines evangelism as “the activity of sharing the joy and justice of the gospel.”⁴⁷ Referring back to the normative task of practical theological interpretation, the question then becomes, “Who is the evangel?” Who is the harbinger of the gospel’s good news who shares joy and justice? Who is to be the recipient of that joy and justice? If Jesus’ ministry is revealed primarily in, among, and through the most

⁴⁵ Clark, 65.

⁴⁶ Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 150, cited in Clark, 66.

⁴⁷ Davis, 13.

marginalized in society, the most vulnerable and exposed to danger, and if that ministry points to the liberating, reconciling, healing presence of God, then that presence of God is to be found most evidently on the margins of our culture and society. For the church to candidly ask such questions is the normative task of practical theology that interprets some of the most vital evangels in our cultural and societal context as being LGBTQ people. This simple exercise in practical theology demonstrates that the Church is to be first the recipient of evangelism, not the bearer of it. Davis continues:

All human participation in evangelism is first receptive and always secondly responsive to Christ's initiative. Luke gives us the key to a faithful response to Christ's initiative in evangelism with the word 'witness': "You shall be my witnesses."⁴⁸

Witnessing to the perspectives of LGBTQ people requires that the congregation set aside all of its preconceived judgments or assumptions about LGBTQ people. "When we are filled with prejudice, suspicion, anxiety, or jealousy, we have no room for welcoming, for listening or receiving."⁴⁹ Churches are perceived as being hostile to LGBTQ people to such an extent that churches cannot afford to meet that perception with half-hearted apologetics that assume to know LGBTQ experiences from an arm's length vantage point. Davis suggests:

As evangelists, rather than adopting the position of the expert, we adopt the position of companion. Through genuine listening, we solicit the story of others, under the conviction that God is already redemptively present in their

⁴⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁹ Homan & Pratt, 11.

lives. Therefore, their story does not need to fit into a proper formula, any specific theology, or any religious language, because their story is not up for our judgment.⁵⁰

This is the posture that the Church must exhibit in receiving the evangelists that would come in response to such hopeful invitations as an ONA Statement. Nouwen continues, “Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger in our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host.”⁵¹ The gifts that we in our churches receive from our LGBTQ guests are the candid lessons we need to learn in order that reconciliation and healing would be brought to centuries of tragic hostility on the part of the Church toward God’s children who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.

⁵⁰ Davis, 60.

⁵¹ Nouwen, 44.

CHAPTER TWO:

A SPIRITUALITY OF HOSPITALITY FROM HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Reasonable children obey their parents out of respect. They are obedient because it is from their parents that they receive instruction. The parent is the one who provides the basic necessities of life, who gives aid and comfort, and who ideally gives them unconditional love. If God does this for us, can we not respond as obedient children? Love all of God's human creatures including those of a variety of races, religious beliefs, ages, abilities, and sexual orientations. This is the desire of God's heart. –Irene S. Travis⁵²

Nouwen's Spiritual Movement from Hostility to Hospitality

To introduce Henri Nouwen's spiritual concept of hostility, I offer the words to this 1905 Vaudeville song by Bert Williams and Alex Rogers called, "Nobody." The following lyrics are from a more recent version of the song rerecorded by Johnny Cash in 2000:

When life seems full of clouds and rain
And I'm full of nothin' but pain
Who soothes my thumpin', bumpin' brain?
Nobody

When Wintertime comes with its snow and sleet
And me with hunger and cold feet
Who says "Here's two bits, go and eat"?

⁵² Irene S. Travis, "Love Your Mother: A Lesbian Womanist Reading of Scripture," eds., Goss, Robert E. and Mona West, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 42.

Nobody

Well, I ain't never done nothin' to nobody
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time
And until I get something from somebody, sometime
I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time

When Summertime comes all warm and clear
And my friends see me drawin' near
Who says, "Come on in and have a beer"?
Nobody

Well, one time when things was lookin' bright
I started to whittlin' on a stick one night
Who said, "Hey! That's dynamite!"?
Nobody

Well, I ain't never done nothin' to nobody
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time
And until I get something from somebody, sometime
I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time⁵³

The song tells a timeless story about someone who has a raincloud hanging over their head that will not go away even with the changing seasons. Misfortune has loomed over this person's life for so long that they have developed a mantra of hostility. More unfortunate than this person's hostile stance, however, is the source of that hostility. The raincloud of misfortune hovering overhead is not happenstance or coincidence; it represents all of the apathy, indifference, and fear that have been exhibited to this person by humanity throughout his life. People do not offer the slightest shred of assistance or even mere pleasantries to this person, so the frustrated individual in this sad tale sings about how he has had enough. From now on, everyone around this

⁵³ From <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Nobody-lyrics-Johnny-Cash/0B93139E97BB9D5D48256DB80031323B> accessed 2 February 2011.

person who continues to brush him aside will be labeled “Nobody.” The title strips those cruel people in this person’s mind of their identity and personhood. It is an exercise in reciprocity, the last morsel of power exercised by an otherwise powerless person against the powerful ones who show no mercy or kindness to this person in need. He feels only hostility coming from the “Nobodys” that surround him, so the only method of upholding his tattered dignity is to respond in kind. The ultimate tragedy of this song is that the apathy, indifference and fear shown to this person are contagious. Hostility is returned with equal hostility by this obviously hurt individual, who says, “Until I get something from somebody, sometime, I don’t intend to do nothin’ for nobody, no time.” Hostility is not only contagious; it is difficult to overcome if, like the person in the song suggests, we wait for someone else to change their demeanor towards us in order for us to consequently change our attitude and behavior.

Henri Nouwen describes this dynamic of hostility in spiritual terms. Hostility is an obstacle within us that keeps us from engaging relationships with anyone who we feel resembles a stranger. The stranger is the other who will not shed his or her strangeness in our eyes until he or she exhibits actions and behaviors that contradict our preconceived notions of them. The person in the song expects for somebody to do something of benefit for him if he is ever to pass on a similar gesture of good will; but the kind gesture offered to this person must be what he wants, when he wants it in the manner by which he expects to receive it. If somebody does not offer him words of encouragement when he is feeling down, offer him a specific amount of money for a

meal when he is hungry, invite him in for a beer when he desires camaraderie, or take notice of his recreational creativity when he wants a compliment, that somebody remains a nobody, that other remains a stranger, and the hostility continues to fester as somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nouwen explains, “In our world the assumption is that strangers are a potential danger and that it is up to them to disprove it.”⁵⁴ However, hostility toward the stranger, Nouwen asserts, cannot be altered practically from the outside in; rather, it must be addressed spiritually from the inside out. This is the process of moving from hostility to hospitality.

The person in the song shows a glimmer of hope in moving from hostility to hospitality. He sings about good intentions that could come to the surface if the opportunity were to present itself: “Until I get something from somebody, sometime, I don’t intend to do nothin’ for nobody, no time.” Nouwen argues that such good intentions lie dormant underneath layers of unaddressed hostility, and this is the spiritual conundrum of well-intentioned human beings and certainly well-intentioned Christians:

Our heart might desire to help others: to feed the hungry, visit the prisoners and offer a shelter to travelers, but meanwhile we have surrounded ourselves with a wall of fear and hostile feelings, instinctively avoiding people and places where we might be reminded of our good intentions.⁵⁵

Facing our own deeply imbedded fears and hostilities is the initial requirement of moving away from hostility itself. Alan Johnson, a UCC minister expanding on

⁵⁴ Nouwen, 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

how fear keeps us shackled to hostility, writes, “Fears freeze hospitality. Embracing faith in the core of our life overcomes fear. It allows us to be at home in our own skin so as to offer hospitality to others.”⁵⁶ Scott Anderson, the executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and a former Presbyterian minister, shares an example of this movement away from hostility. The parents of a 17-year-old boy who had just told them that he was gay were referred to Anderson by the parents’ pastor. When Anderson drove to the couples’ house to have a conversation with them, they disclosed questions that revealed their inmost hostilities, previously unknown to them: “Are we, his parents, responsible for his homosexuality? Doesn’t the Bible say this is wrong? Should our son see a counselor? What will people in our congregation think?”⁵⁷ After the couple faced and shared these fears, however, what ensued was a movement that Anderson describes as a conversion experience:

During my afternoon conversation with the parents of the 17-year-old, I had the privilege of sharing some of the story of how I became aware of my sexual orientation. I explained how I learned that there was no one to blame, that my identity as a gay man was a gift from God, and that the Bible was not a roadblock to acceptance but a message of hope for every gay and lesbian person and his or her parents. Over the course of the next year, the journey brought these parents more than a change of heart; it took them through a conversion experience to a spiritual awakening.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Alan Johnson, *Encounters at the Counter: What Congregations Can Learn About Hospitality from Business* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 103.

⁵⁷ Scott D. Anderson, “Living By the Word,” *The Christian Century* 128, no. 2 (January 25, 2011): 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The fearful parents' openness to and receptivity of Anderson's own life story and the spiritual awakening that ensued demonstrates a movement from hostility to hospitality.

Nouwen writes:

When we have seen and acknowledged our own hostilities and fears without hesitation, it is more likely that we also will be able to sense from within the other pole towards which we want to lead not only ourselves but our neighbors as well.⁵⁹

The antithetical pole that resides within us, Nouwen contends, is hospitality, and the spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality opens our inward being to the other, peeling away their layers of strangeness that ostracize us one from another, as was the case with the parents' openness to Anderson's guidance.

Additionally, this spiritual movement of drawing us from an inward to an outward focus connects us with others in an invitational manner. Hospitality stirs a desire in us to yearn for community with others, to invite our neighbor into a mutual environment wherein they might speak from their own perspective and share their gifts on their terms. It is primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy, a "somebody" instead of a "nobody."⁶⁰ In the context of the song, the hospitable person does not keep score over how much or how little has been offered to him or her by strangers; rather, the hospitable person strives to spark relationships with others in order to understand and

⁵⁹ Nouwen, 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 49.

appreciate their lives, and to add their experiences to his or her own perspective. If Nouwen's spirituality of hospitality were to be applied to matters of ecclesiology, I believe the ONA church would have more adequate resources for answering the question, "We're ONA...now what?"

Spiritual to Ecclesiological Hospitality: What Exactly Are We Affirming?

Before continuing with the argument about how a congregation progresses in being an ONA church, we need to examine the implications of the ONA Statement itself. While the United Church of Christ has a definition of the term ONA, I refer here specifically to the ONA Statement articulated by Friends Congregational Church. Examining this ONA Statement, two questions arise: 1) What are we as a congregation "open" to, and 2) what exactly are we "affirming"?⁶¹ Asking these two

⁶¹ I need to point out here my discomfort with the word 'open' in the Open & Affirming Statement. While on the surface, to be open implies a welcome, the word itself, 'open,' is passive. If I say that I am open to another human being and who they are as a person, then it sounds as if I am merely tolerating that person: "I am open to you. I will tolerate your experiences and views, but that is as far as I am willing to go." However, there is a movement geared toward more ecumenism and unity regarding church statements that seek to reach out to LGBTQ people. Believe Out Loud (<http://www.believeoutloud.com/>) reviews all of the statements to this effect across denominational lines (e.g., the Presbyterian "More Light" statement, the Methodist "Reconciling" statement, the Disciples of Christ "GLAD" statement) and takes the most constructive terminologies from each of them to form an ecumenical statement that is proactive in its welcome to and affirmation of LGBTQ people. From the "What is Believe Out Loud?" page of the Believe Out Loud website found at http://www.believeoutloud.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8&Itemid=9: "At its core, this is what Believe Out Loud is about – helping churches live out this Christian principle by becoming fully inclusive of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity...It's not enough for us to silently believe that all are equal in God's eyes. It is time for us to put our beliefs into action." Their suggestion is that all churches hoping to reach and include LGBTQ people adopt a "Welcoming and Affirming Statement." For Friends Church (or for the UCC) to adopt such a statement would replace the word 'open' with the word 'welcoming,' which would replace a passive

questions in this manner exercises the normative task of practical theology by addressing matters of welcome and hospitality. Being open is for Friends Church to be welcoming, and to be affirming is to show hospitality. To what extent, then, is Friends Church welcoming and hospitable?

The second bullet point in the Friends Church ONA Statement declares that we are open to “persons of every sexual orientation, race, nationality, ability, age and gender” so that they might “participate in all aspects of our church's life and ministry.”⁶² Setting aside specific questions of identity that might not immediately appear in these descriptors (e.g., Spanish-speaking people. Presently, there are no services offered in Spanish at Friends Church, which is located in a state that is predominantly Hispanic and growing in this capacity), it is arguably safe to suggest that Friends Church is open to all people. The fact that “every sexual orientation” and “every gender” are listed shows very clearly that Friends Church is purposefully welcoming to LGBTQ people.

The question of “What exactly are we affirming?” is at the root of this study’s big question, “We’re ONA...now what?” If Friends Church is open to LGBTQ people, then what, by nature of that openness, is Friends consequently given the opportunity to affirm? In what ways does Friends Church demonstrate this affirmation? And if Friends Church discovers that it is not adequately affirming what

word with an active one. The active word ‘welcoming’ goes beyond mere tolerance to a complete embrace of the stranger, whoever they may be. As this study moves forward in examining what is meant by “open and affirming,” I wanted to point out my personal stance on this terminology.

⁶² The full ONA Statement is found at this link on the Friends Church website: http://www.friends-ucc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=59.

comes as a result of that openness, would it not be imperative to Friends Church to reevaluate the extent and specific articulation of its openness for purposes of authenticity, honesty and the church's own integrity?

Some answers to the question of "What exactly are we affirming?" were revealed in the interviews carried out for this study. For now, however, I will simply provide that being open to LGBTQ people means that we are called to affirm the sexuality and gender identity of our LGBTQ siblings. Such a gesture of hospitality creates the free space that Nouwen mentions where individuals are empowered and encouraged to explore their faith without apology, reservation or fear concerning who they truly are. For the church to be such a space is for the sexuality and gender identity of all people to be received as gifts to the ecclesiological perspective and for the Body of Christ to take another progressive step toward being whole. Nouwen explains this in terms of religious education:

The fact that so many students do not care for religious instruction is largely related to the fact that their own life experience is hardly touched. There are just as many ways to be Christian as there are Christians, and it seems that more important than the imposition of any doctrine or precoded idea is to offer the students the place where they can reveal their great human potentials to love, to give, and to create, and where they can find the affirmation that gives them the courage to continue their search without fear.⁶³

For the ONA church to be this kind of free space requires that the congregation affirm LGBTQ people through that initial exercise in hospitality that asks what is being

⁶³ Nouwen, 62.

affirmed. Neglecting such questions is to be open but not quite affirming, welcoming but not really hospitable.

Perhaps the question “What exactly are we affirming?” brings some disconcerting answers to the church that has grown comfortable with the way things are. Cheri DiNovo comments on this congregational anxiety over losing a sense of comfort based on her church’s intentional efforts at affirming diversity:

The differences among us kept us uncomfortable, not more comfortable, and our commitment to a sinless Christ kept us repentant. The differences among us kept us faithful to the quest for hospitality as scripturally dictated and more faithful, we prayed, to a Christ who forgave sinners just like us when our hospitality failed.⁶⁴

To affirm the sexual orientation of LGBTQ people might require that the church be prepared for same-sex couples counseling and wedding ceremonies. It might require that we be prepared for candid conversations about the nature of our relationships in different capacities. It might require that we review everything from our educational curriculum to how we label our bathrooms when it comes to affirming every gender. Justin Tanis, himself a transgendered clergyperson, expands on this in his book,

Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith:

The bathroom issue is one of the most frequent questions that congregations ask me to address when they are seeking to be inclusive of transgendered persons. Some in the transgendered community have joked that our rallying cry should be, “Let my people pee.” People who do not visibly fit the categories of male and female often have no place to go. People who have a gender identity that is different from their physical appearance can also find it very emotionally painful to have their sense of gender incongruity reinforced

⁶⁴ DiNovo, 113.

every time they need to use the rest room. While it may seem rather insignificant, this issue is a major barrier to participation.⁶⁵

Discovering what would possibly be required of a congregation that seeks to affirm LGBTQ people might be met with anxiety. It might cause the comfortable flock to worry about where the process of intentional affirmation might lead. Jesus says something about this in Matthew 6:25-34 (NRSV):

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Jesus teaches about worry being an obstacle to the kingdom of God. We worry about matters that frighten us, things that bring us anxiety. For the ONA church to meet opportunities for more intentional affirmation of LGBTQ people with worry is for the ONA church to meet the stranger with hostility and fear. Worryment puts the ONA congregation in a holding pattern that is more content with preconceived

⁶⁵ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 120-121.

understandings than with God's blessed surprises that might be revealed through the lives of our LGBTQ siblings. Nouwen refers to these worries as preoccupations:

Preoccupations are our fearful ways of keeping things the same, and it often seems that we prefer bad certainty to a good uncertainty. Our preoccupations help us to maintain the personal world we have created over the years and block the way to revolutionary change. Our fears, uncertainties and hostilities make us fill our inner world with ideas, opinions, judgments and values to which we cling as to a precious property. Instead of facing the challenge of new worlds opening themselves up for us, and struggling in the open field, we hide behind the walls of our concerns holding on to the familiar life items we have collected in the past.⁶⁶

Addressing the concept of bad certainty versus good uncertainty, Justin Tanis speaks from his own experience and offers this insight pertaining to children in our congregations and how churches might worry about purposefully showing hospitality to transgendered people:

What are we afraid that our children might learn from the presence of transgendered people?...Children are very much subject to the gender pressures of our society and also need affirmation that they can express themselves in ways that are right for them. Children are often better at seeing the nuances within a person than adults ever believe. In the years that I was in denial about my gender identity, one of the things that bothered me the most was that children would ask me if I were a boy or a girl, even when I was wearing dresses. When I taught preschool, one little girl kept insisting that I was a man and told me that I should grow a mustache. Not until years later did I perceive what it was that she saw and did I understand the source of my own discomfort with her comments. Children are well aware of gender differences even when we attempt to hide them.⁶⁷

If Friends Church, or any ONA church striving to live out its ONA Statement, harbors even an inkling of worry about affirming the whole life of LGBTQ people

⁶⁶ Nouwen, 51.

⁶⁷ Tanis, 118.

within the congregation, affirming the blessed consequences of being “open” to all, then hostility and fear are present. Those seeds of hostility planted in the ecclesiological life of the ONA church will grow like weeds and seal off any attempts at moving forward in openness, or what Friends Church would call an extravagant welcome. Nouwen explains:

Although the word ‘stranger’ suggests someone who belongs to another world than ours, speaks another language and has different customs, it is important, first of all, to recognize the stranger in our own familiar circle. When we are able to be good hosts for the strangers in our midst we may find also ways to expand our hospitality to broader horizons.⁶⁸

It might bring initial worry to the congregation that delves into practical theological questioning about the candid nature of being an ONA church, but Jesus instructs us to set worry free, like a kite in a powerful gust of wind, so that we are liberated to run wherever we are called to go. Setting aside worries and striving instead for the kingdom of God is a decision to cast off bad certainty and to embrace good uncertainty. Practically, being intentionally hospitable to LGBTQ people in all matters of ecclesiology is an easy decision of faith to make when the intent is to progress, to transform:

The deep meaning of hospitality involves our entrance into the mess of things; it means we run right into the chaos...If we do this, there is a slow, mysterious something that happens, transforming the riot into something good. Naturally...the hard thing is throwing yourself headlong into the riot and trusting the reality of transformation. We aren't going to run toward the riot unless we think transformation is worthwhile.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Nouwen, 54-55.

⁶⁹ Homan & Pratt, 113-114.

As Nouwen suggests, we know that “running toward the riot,” responding faithfully to questions of what exactly we are affirming with intentional hospitality, leads us to expand our circle of openness to more and more people; more and more sacred children of God bearing gifts from the Divine. In other words, to ask the question “What exactly are we affirming?” in light of openness to LGBTQ people and responding with purposeful hospitality causes the church’s posture to be more open to even more people whom the world might consider strange for whatever reason.

To be affirming requires that we be hospitable; to be hospitable leads to greater openness; and a more expansive welcome in that openness leads to further questions of “What exactly are we affirming?” This transformational, progressive ecclesiology of hospitality would serve Friends Church well given that its vision is “to offer God’s extravagant welcome to all.”

Nouwen’s Experience and the Need for an Ecclesiology of Hospitality

Nouwen’s spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality is found in his classic book aforementioned titled *Reaching Out*. In this work, Nouwen describes hospitality as a paradox that strives to make emptiness void of fear and abundant with friendship where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free: “Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a

chance for the guest to find his own.”⁷⁰ This is especially significant in terms of hospitality to LGBTQ people, and it is particularly noteworthy when it comes to Nouwen’s own identity and consequential experience.

As I discussed some initial ideas for this doctoral study with one of my readers, Dr. Steve V. Sprinkle, Nouwen’s writings on spirituality came up. Steve mentioned that he had once served as a teaching assistant to Nouwen. Based on this experience and retrospect, Steve disclosed that Nouwen was a closeted gay man who only came out to a handful of friends in very private circles. Sharing this information with different members of Friends Congregational Church, whom I knew followed Nouwen’s writings with passionate devotion, I was surprised to discover that this had not occurred to them in the slightest: “Nouwen was gay? I had no idea.” Needless to say, the revelation did not alter those few Nouwen devotees’ reverence of the man or his work. Tragically, this was not a natural assurance for Nouwen in his lifetime. He preceded his father in death at the young age of 64, and it is believed that Nouwen’s premature demise was a result of the enormous emotional, spiritual and physical toll that his closeted existence took on his life.⁷¹

In his biography of Henri Nouwen, *Wounded Prophet*, Michael Ford follows the Roman Catholic Priest’s matriculation into the Menninger Institute in the mid-1960s. There, the psychoanalytic understanding of behavior in the treatment of

⁷⁰ Nouwen, 49.

⁷¹ Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (New York, NY: An Image Book Published by Doubleday, 1999), 67.

hospital patients was merged with the use of the hospital's social environment so that all members of the clinic's staff, including Nouwen, had a role in helping the mentally ill to recover.⁷² Ford reveals:

At Menninger he became more acutely aware of his homosexuality, which he saw as a disability, and it started to disturb him greatly. He knew that the sharing of it would not elicit much sympathy in church circles, and an understanding response from fellow priests could not be guaranteed.⁷³

This closeted existence confined Nouwen to an adolescent level emotionally and placed his spiritual identity uppermost in his mind.⁷⁴ The complete self and personhood of Nouwen was, in effect, lost.

Ford quotes Michael Harank, Nouwen's part-time assistant at Harvard, who comments on it being "very clear" to him that his mentor was gay, and the enormous sense of relief Nouwen felt when he was eventually able to share this truth with a small circle of friends:

The coming-out process enables you to build a sense of solidarity and community with others who have shared the hellish journey that gay people have to go through in order to come to a new sense of freedom about who we are... Here was Henri in [the Catholic Church] which didn't honor sexuality or give him the tools to deal with the area of sexuality, and which was quite violent in a number of its teachings with regard to homosexuality. How was he going to make that a part of his writings, his life, and his intimate relationships? He couldn't, and it was because of the fear.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid., 90.

⁷³ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 66.

To honor one's sexuality is to acknowledge their very identity and, in so doing, to echo the two words that resonate more than any other pairing in the entirety of Christian Scripture: "Fear not." Sutherland contends:

We should see others (neighbors, enemies, and strangers) in such a way that they are visible to us not as a mere object but as a reflection of our own fallen and redeemed humanity. Seeing is inhuman if it is not the seeing of another human.⁷⁶

If the Church hopes to enact such an outlook toward LGBTQ people, it must move from extending welcome to offering hospitality; it must apply the spiritual practices of attending to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring to its ecclesiology. In doing so, the small circles of which Harank testifies and wherein Nouwen found soul-hungry relief would be expanded within the Church to the culmination of the Body of Christ and to the glory of God.

I am convinced that were Nouwen empowered to embrace his sexual identity and incorporate that beautiful strength into his vocation, he would have penned essays on ecclesiological hospitality, inclusive and celebratory of the LGBTQ community to which he was bound. Ford suggests:

Had he lived, Henri Nouwen's next major work may well have been a study of homosexuality, a story of the heart, the mind, and the body. He read about the matter voraciously and questioned many people, even alerting publishers to his plans. He told friends that he wanted to write about it thoroughly and when he was emotionally free to do so.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Sutherland, 37.

⁷⁷ Ford, 212.

While Nouwen offered a spirituality of hospitality, this study seeks to honor where he was perhaps too emotionally constrained or vocationally limited to go in his position of being a closeted Roman Catholic priest. Taking Nouwen's spiritual tenets of hospitality, this study explores an ecclesiology of hospitality with an emphasis on LGBTQ perspectives. After all, if the free space of which Nouwen wrote in spiritual terms were to have embraced him fully—sexual orientation, gender identity and all—during his lifetime on an ecclesiological level, imagine the guidance and resources our ONA churches might have today from this beautifully insightful man.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE INTERVIEWS, PART ONE: VOICES FROM THE DIVINE

“The first duty of love is to listen” –Paul Tillich⁷⁸

Approaching the Interviews

Nouwen’s spiritual movement suggests that hostility confines, restricts and suffocates, and that hospitality flanks hostility, providing room to breathe, explore and question through the culmination of a free space. Over the course of two months, I conducted 11 face-to-face interviews with 12 individuals in which I sought to create such a free space. Through cyber networks and word of mouth, I sent out my requests for interviewees who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, who were not members of Friends Congregational Church, and who wished to share their opinions on the topic of hospitality and, more specifically, church hospitality. In the hours (literally) and days that would follow, I received enthusiastic responses from individuals who wanted to engage in this conversation. People were yearning for that free space. People were longing for less suffocation and more breathing room, exploration and questioning. One of the interviewees told me:

⁷⁸ Paul Tillich, quotation from http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_first_duty_of_love_is_to_listen/218174.html, accessed 15 February 2011.

I have very rarely met a pastor that I feel that I could sit down and present questions without them just shutting me off and telling me that I'm wrong...I think I was telling a friend of mine how I would love to find a church where a pastor would be willing to say the words 'I could be wrong.'⁷⁹

Hearing this opinion loud and clear, I approached each interview carefully and with a great deal of respect.

On this note, I must confess some misguided anxiety I had about the interview process before it began: I was concerned that my own sexual orientation and gender identity might put up psychological barriers between the LGBTQ interviewees and me. Perhaps my being a heterosexual male would influence the answers in pejorative ways; maybe the responses would be compromised or reserved in some way. What I discovered, however, is that although my sexual orientation and gender identity may have been a subtle factor in how the interviewees engaged in the conversational interview, what proved to be much more blatant was my vocational identity; LGBTQ individuals were being asked to share their honest, unabashed perspectives on church hospitality by none other than an ordained minister and pastor of a church. The following exchange is between a 28-year-old woman named Lily (a pseudonym) who identifies as queer and me:

Dan: I've got a series of phrases and I just want to throw them out and see how they make you feel. You can tell me in as little as a word or as much as a couple of sentences what comes to mind for you when I throw out these phrases. The first one is "Jesus loves you."

Lily: What comes to my mind? I think Jesus would love me unconditionally. But a lot of people [who go to church] will tell me

⁷⁹ James, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor's office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 17 December 2010.

that if you don't believe in Jesus you will go to hell and that's not what "Jesus loves me" means to me. It shouldn't be conditional. Like, "You have to believe in me then I'll love you." I don't think that's what it means. I think "Jesus loves me" means he'll love me unconditionally.

Dan: Okay. Thanks. Makes sense to me.

Lily: I'm sorry because of.....most of the experience I have with the church is not very.....

Dan: I should have said at the beginning of the interview, you know, just because I'm a pastor, don't hold back. Any of your feelings or experiences with the church, negative or positive, all of it will be helpful. So, no need to apologize whatsoever.⁸⁰

Although I did not come to the interviews dressed in clerical garb or even in formal attire that might be stereotypically associated with church dress, I was seen by many of the interviewees as the face of the church, the face of an institution that has oppressed, silenced and shut out LGBTQ people for centuries. In this capacity, my attempt at creating free space in which the interviewees and I could converse would require more than care and respect; it would require apology and humility, both of which I was more than willing to provide.⁸¹

To invoke such a conversational interview, I did not use a set number of questions, nor did I allow for the interviewees to preview the list of questions prior to

⁸⁰ Lily, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor's office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 28 December 2010.

⁸¹ Given that the interviewees were self-selected, and that they agreed to visit with a Christian pastor, I acknowledge the limitations of the interviews in this capacity. Surely, many if not most LGBTQ people in the Bryan-College Station area would not agree to meet with me for a conversational interview on the grounds of my church representation, perhaps even if they were paid, which no interviewees were. Additionally, given that I did not have 100 percent of the LGBTQ community of B-CS from which to choose interviewees from the start, the overall perspective of LGBTQ people in B-CS is not wholly represented. For the reader's benefit here, I also acknowledge this limitation not reaching the formal standard for social scientific research.

our face-to-face meeting. Depending on the comfort level and personality of the interviewee, as well as the environment in which the interview was conducted, some of the conversations lasted for as little as 45 minutes, and others as long as two hours.⁸² Given that at times the interviews brought up delicate subject matter for the interviewees, some questions were omitted altogether in the spirit of the conversation's natural flow. For example, a couple of the interviews had portions that morphed into pastoral care sessions in which looking ahead to the next question that I had in my notes to ask was dismissed for the sake of asking instead, literally or figuratively, "Where do we go from here?"

Still, the conversational dynamic of the interviews also allowed for this researcher to ask some leading questions for purposes of framing my study and underlining some of its major themes. It must be noted here that these leading questions were minimal, and they do not hold up to the formal standards for social scientific research. For purposes of this study, therefore, some of the comments made by the interviewees are utilized to illuminate themes of the research on hospitality; however, a majority of the themes raised by the interviewees inform the topics covered in this work. In an attempt to be true to an exercise in practical theology, I set aside foregone conclusions and relied instead on the interviewees to challenge this

⁸² Verbatim transcripts of the interviews are not included in the appendix for this study. The transcriptions of the interviews in single-spaced Times New Roman 12-point font were as many as 25 pages long each. Including them in this study would overshadow the written research and conclusions in length.

research, to challenge me, and to hopefully challenge Friends Congregational Church on the question, “We’re ONA...now what?”

A Diversity of Voices in the Free Space

Originally, I had intended for the interviews to serve as support for my own arguments. Serving an ONA congregation for five years, I have networked within the queer community, and I have developed many new friendships with LGBTQ people and their families. From this vantage point I have witnessed areas of connection as well as disparity between the church and LGBTQ people that Friends Church intends to reach through its ONA identity. Out of this peculiar pastoral experience, I developed many of the presumptions of this study before delving into the interview process. I was soon reminded, however, that I needed to heed the words of Proverbs 1:5, *NIV*: “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.” Despite the growing number of white hairs on my head, I do not assume to be wise; but listening to the perspectives of LGBTQ people in light of church hospitality is a quest for wisdom, and certainly a resource for more informed discernment on the part of the ONA congregation in need of ministerial guidance. This is one extent to which the interviews benefit this study and consequently the church that I serve.

M.R. Ritley writes in *Gifted By Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*, “It is the right of a community to define itself, a lesson that the church is

only slowly learning in cases of other minority groups and that it has yet failed to apply to the gay and lesbian Christians in its midst.”⁸³ Recognizing Nouwen’s warning, to approach these interviews with some preconceived vantage point would be a demonstration of hostility. Hostility says, “I have my views, and you and your views may either conform to my views or deny them. You are either on my side or you are against me.” Hospitality, inversely, seeks to create more open space into which various views may be brought, appreciated, and mutually heard:

Hospitality requires being open to the self-declaration of others, allowing them to say who they are. It is in this way that my uncertainty about who the other is is removed. Until this occurs I am captive to the possibility that what I have seen is incomplete.⁸⁴

Listening to the interviewees’ responses with a mind that sought guidance for further discernment, I found LGBTQ perspectives informing my hearing and interpretation of the wisdom of the Proverbs, the comfort of the Psalms, the witness of the Prophets, and the teachings of Jesus throughout the entirety of Scripture (More on how this applies to biblical criticism in Chapter Five).

Additionally, the interviewees reminded me of the fact that LGBTQ identities transcend those of race, age, gender, culture, ability, and so on. As I said before, these past five years have granted me the immeasurable fortune of knowing so many LGBTQ people in our church family and surrounding community, and there is

⁸³ L. William Countryman and M.R. Ritley, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 3.

⁸⁴ Sutherland, 38.

incredible diversity throughout that network of relationships. Still, that network is limited, and within a limited number of people, comes a limited spectrum of diversity. Seeking LGBTQ interviewees from mostly outside of that familiar network, I soon realized, expanded the spectrum. I understand, however, that those who accepted the invitation to be interviewed are a very self-selected, remarkable group of individuals who do not necessarily represent the wider Bryan-College Station LGBTQ community.⁸⁵

The interviewees, almost all of whom I had not met prior to interviewing them, called my attention yet again to how many societal barriers and divisions LGBTQ identities transcend. The youngest interviewee was 21, and the oldest was 64 with the other ten interviewees' ages scattered throughout that range. A majority of the interviewees were Caucasian, but one was Chinese, and another was Latino. Some were students, some were healthcare workers, some were entrepreneurs, some were on the faculty at Texas A&M University, and some worked in the small business

⁸⁵ In February 2011, I attended a meeting in the Texas A&M University GLBT Resource Center for the initial planning of a GLBT Pride Community Center. An unofficial board of representatives was seeking ideas from LGBTQ people and straight allies on how to bring the vision of a GLBT Pride Community in our city to fruition. When the topic of raising funds came up, a straight ally respectfully asked if the GLBT community ever did service projects benefitting the greater Bryan-College Station area, such as working with Habitat for Humanity, in an effort to draw more attention to their own GLBT community. The response was offered that there is no such thing as a GLBT community in Bryan-College Station, which is why they were seeking to create a GLBT Pride Community Center in the first place. I offer this example to shed contextual light on the research, and to reveal the diversity of opinions from LGBTQ people that are captured in the interviews as well as the myriad diversity not represented by them. For example, I acknowledge that many LGBTQ people in our community might never agree to meet with me for an interview on the grounds of it having something to do with the church. However, I would also add that some LGBTQ people were initially reluctant about meeting with me for an interview and only agreed to do so after gentle coercion from friends who could more adequately explain the purposes of the research.

industry. Some were married, some had a partner, and some were single. Eight identified as male, three as female, and one as neither, referring to themselves as gender queer.

When all of this beautiful diversity is seen through an ecclesiological lens, there is discernment, there is guidance and there is wisdom added to the Body of Christ. Consider Galatians 3:27-28, *NRSV*:

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.

When it comes to the church that emphasizes being open to and affirming of all LGBTQ people, this passage calls us to consider how a removal of barriers based on gender or sexual orientation affects the free space in which we strive to be one in Christ Jesus. DiNovo expands on this hermeneutical approach of dissolving societal barriers that block us from the liberating nature of Scripture:

Perhaps where theologians make a mistake is to assume a nineteenth- and twentieth-century understanding of identity as ontological. This is a historical, philosophical, and theological blunder, for biblically we are called to have faith only in God. The foundational error, if you will, of foundationalism in the area of sexuality is that it affects our reading of scripture when the reverse should be the warrant. If “male” and “female” are not categories of identity but of performativity, what might it mean that they are the creation of God, or that Jesus Christ was male?⁸⁶

A scriptural interpretation of gender identities and sexual orientations in this respect would be primary, not secondary, to the gender roles and consequent sexualities through which we understand one another as congregational peers.

⁸⁶ DiNovo, 67.

The United Church of Christ is founded on Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one."⁸⁷ Striving to be one with our LGBTQ siblings calls upon an ecclesiology of hospitality to form a free space in which the societal barriers that divide us one from another based on sexual orientation and gender identity fall. For those divisions to dissolve and our oneness in Christ to come to fruition requires that the voices of LGBTQ people be sought out, listened to, and learned from. This movement from hostility to hospitality is an act of obedience to God on the part of the ONA congregation. DiNovo explains:

God's idea of who is to be added to the Christian community is the someone that the Christian community often pointedly fears and hates...It could be argued that the one sent by God has more, not less, right and credibility to the title "Christian" than the ones called church. Such a one is the current prophet calling the church ever back to obedience. The one from outside the temple, like Christ, like Paul, is the one from God. The church's role is to find that voice so that it can find its own *raison d'être*.⁸⁸ By preaching, healing, and traveling, by flinging the doors of the temple open wide, the church hopes to find the one whose voice will call it (the church) back to obedience, an obedience from which it is always defecting.⁸⁹

The lessons we acquire from those LGBTQ voices and perspectives serve to call our church back and back again to the obedient posture of hospitality, and to thereby nurture our ecclesiological health, expanding the Body of Christ.

⁸⁷ John 17:21a.

⁸⁸ *Raison d'être* is French for "meaning for existence."

⁸⁹ DiNovo, 94.

The Purpose of the Interviews: Answers Seeking Questions

I have already described the need for genuine listening in spiritual terms for purposes of evoking free space. When applied to matters of ecclesiology, listening becomes a piece of what Richard Osmer calls the descriptive-empirical task of practical theology.⁹⁰ When the congregation delves into this process, listening becomes priestly listening. Osmer explains

Priestly listening is, first and foremost, an activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders. It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care, and edification.⁹¹

However, the congregation of Friends Church was not carrying out the interviews with LGBTQ people, I was. My attempt at priestly listening would be incomplete; that is, unless I sought to bring what I listened to, what I heard, back to the congregation. Only then might Osmer's descriptive-empirical task of practical theology be engaged.

Although I never described the interviews as an effort in priestly listening on behalf of the congregation that I serve, some of the enthusiasm in the interviewees' responses was based on the thought that perhaps their answers would influence the

⁹⁰ Osmer, 31-78.

⁹¹ Ibid., 35.

church. For one particular interviewee, this was perceived as a gesture of the church holding itself accountable in affirming LGBTQ people: “I find it excellent that you are willing to question what you are doing and thinking about how you can better do that next time. That is growth! You are not resting on your laurels.”⁹² Although he would not articulate it this way, this interviewee heard the questions I was presenting as the ONA church asking itself, “We’re ONA...now what?” In this capacity, the interviewees’ responses became answers to questions that had yet to be asked. For priestly listening to be carried out completely, the congregation would need to ask the questions, not just me. Furthermore, the congregation would need to be prompted toward asking those questions by the voices of LGBTQ people’ experiences, not the other way around.

The purpose of the interviews then, aside from informing my own ministerial perspective, was to seek the voices of LGBTQ people that might prompt the congregation to return to its ONA Statement in a self-questioning act of ecclesiological hospitality. DiNovo outlines the following questions for the church’s inward reflection on being, as Osmer suggests, mutually supporting, caring and edifying:

Why did they pick this congregation at this time?
What brought them here for the first time and what kept them coming back?
What would stop them from being a member?
What would keep them as members?
How could the church serve them?

⁹² John and Lance, face-to-face interview conducted at Village Café, Bryan, Texas, 17 January 2011.

What was their history with churches?
What did God mean to them?
What did they think God's call to them was about?
Who was Christ for them?
How did they feel called by Christ to this place, or did they?⁹³

These are good and challenging questions, but the ONA congregation must not “rest on its laurels,” as the aforementioned interviewee stated, by succumbing to the temptation to answer those questions without engaging in priestly listening toward LGBTQ people's perspectives; then and only then might the ONA church be an environment that practices mutual support, care and edification. Ritley turns the questioning toward her LGBTQ peers:

Did Jesus recognize that only people on the fringes can remake the center?
Do we recognize that our being on the fringes makes us one of the forces to remake the center? And one of the groups to help remake the church?⁹⁴

The Benedictine nun and prolific spiritual writer, Joan Chittister, writes:

To practice hospitality in our world, it may be necessary to evaluate all the laws and all the promotions and all the invitation lists of corporate and political society from the point of the view of people who never make the lists. Then hospitality may demand that we work to change things.⁹⁵

The interviews in this study serve as a sounding board for a culmination of LGBTQ voices that might spark the questions necessary for priestly listening. I argue that the congregation's priestly listening leads to ecclesiological change that demonstrates

⁹³ DiNovo, 103.

⁹⁴ Countryman and Ritley, 49-50.

⁹⁵ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, quoted on *God's Politics*, blog, “Voices of the Day,” <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/09> (17 September 2007).

authentic hospitality toward LGBTQ people and all whom the ONA church strives to welcome and affirm in the name of Jesus Christ and to the glory of God.

The Beige Colored Church

Carlos is a 34-year-old gay male with a variety of denominational backgrounds in his history of church attendance. He and his partner own a local dance club that is known as a gay bar; however, they are adamant about the club being an environment that welcomes all people:

As a business, if we want to stay viable, to stay afloat, we have to reach across all lines in this town. We want to be able to create a welcoming environment for everybody; so, even though we are a gay bar, we don't like to label it.⁹⁶

Describing how his partner and he respond to some of the gay clientele who express complaints about the club being “too straight,” Carlos says, “We have all kinds coming in here, so when you come in here you had better respect it.”⁹⁷ This reflects much of Carlos’ interpretation of ecclesiological hospitality:

Church hospitality would be creating a mutual environment. Hospitality in terms of a church to me is walking in a place as if you've never been there before and everything being almost neutral, beige colored. You can walk in and be yourself, feel safe, shake hands and not feel threatened, like you're about to be seduced or overcome by overzealous opinions and thoughts.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Carlos, face-to-face interview conducted at Village Café, Bryan, Texas, 12 December 2010.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Carlos' understanding of what is antithetical to church hospitality rings true for Patti, a 43-year-old who identifies as gender queer, and whose sexual orientation is that s/he is attracted to women. S/he describes this dynamic of over zealous opinions as an obstacle to Carlos' definition of hospitality:

It's not necessarily an open dialogue. It's, "We're going to shut you out. Ultimately, you're not welcome here if you don't think exactly like we think." So, I think when it comes to how they deal with other perspectives, the churches miss the boat. It also has to do with authority. I think religion and so many religious figures get caught up in their authority and their power, so it becomes me telling you what to do and it's not an equal playing field. It's an "I'm up here, you're down there" kind of a thing; just a lack of willingness to meet people where they are.⁹⁹

For Carlos and Patti, the tendency for churches to exhibit an authoritative stance is what encumbers hospitality. This zealotry stands in the way of that neutral environment wherein someone can safely be themselves. How might the church move from being caught up in its own authority and power and toward being the beige colored church that strives to be hospitable to all people?

According to James, a 22-year-old gay male, what the church needs here is an attitude adjustment: "Hospitality is an attitude of welcoming and preparation."¹⁰⁰

Johnson suggests:

Hospitality means creating a space in which the welcoming Spirit of the Holy is engaged in an encounter. This encompasses our attitude, the environment, acknowledgement of and listening to the other, our genuine concern for the other's well-being, and responding appropriately to the other's needs.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Patti, face-to-face interview conducted at Murphy's Law, Bryan, Texas, 23 December 2010.

¹⁰⁰ James, interview.

This welcoming attitude is not something that happens automatically, but something that is constantly practiced by the hospitable host. James recollects:

As my mom has beat into my head over the years growing up, being a good host means cleaning the house, making sure that the bathroom is clean, and that you have food and drinks to offer people. So it's more than just being welcoming, but being prepared to be welcoming.¹⁰²

John and Lance, a gay male couple of nearly 25 years, feel that the hospitable welcome is nearly impossible. They use the metaphor of a cocktail party in describing the church's attempt to accommodate all LGBTQ people. Food was provided at the party they attended. The guest of honor was a vegetarian who was extremely allergic to chocolate. Another one of the guests adhered to a strictly gluten-free diet.

Additionally, Lance has a heart condition which required major surgery in the recent past, and he must keep cholesterol to a bare minimum. John summates, "There is a level at which it is extremely difficult to accommodate everyone, but somebody can try. That makes a really good host: the person who has actually tried to do the research and understand."¹⁰³ The devoted act of trying is the discipline of preparation that yields a warm welcome. The ONA church might not be able to accommodate the needs of all LGBTQ people, but hospitality requires that we always try. As we are reminded in Galatians 6:9, *NIV*, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

¹⁰¹ Johnson, 45.

¹⁰² James, interview.

¹⁰³ John and Lance, interview.

Unfortunately, there is a moment during my time of serving the pastorate of Friends Church when I failed to even try to accommodate the needs of someone who identified as transgendered. Michelle was an MTF transvestite who had been visiting our church for the Sunday morning worship services for a few weeks.¹⁰⁴ Before the service began, she approached me and asked if there was a bathroom available for her to use. Knowing that the only unisex bathrooms that we had were outside the main sanctuary space in the temporary portable building or in the two children's rooms (the nursery and a room for toddlers and young children), I immediately felt embarrassed. My feeling was that I was somehow exposed on the church's behalf for not being thoughtful enough to accommodate Michelle's needs. However, instead of apologizing for what I saw as an oversight on our church's part, I fumbled with an answer for Michelle. Perhaps I was trying to cover up our congregational blunder, as I saw it, when I said, "Well, we do have a unisex bathroom, but you have to go through the nursery to get to it." I pointed to where Michelle could find the nursery's unisex bathroom, and then I returned to preparing for the worship service.

Ironically, by reaching for what I thought might be an accommodating answer for Michelle in pointing her in the direction of the unisex restroom in the nursery, I did more damage from a standpoint of hospitality than if Friends Church were to have had no unisex restrooms to speak of and I had been forced to apologetically admit

¹⁰⁴ MTF stands for Male to Female, and it is more commonly associated with transsexuals. I use it here to detail Michelle's identity as an MTF transvestite. Michelle identifies as female but she was born male. She would like to undergo SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery), but the cost is too high. In addition to referring to herself as a transvestite, Michelle self-identifies as a cross dresser.

that we only had women's and men's restrooms. Had that been the case, perhaps I would have been forced to ask Michelle whether she might prefer the women's or men's restroom instead of nervously assuming that she would require a unisex restroom. Jumping to that assumption was my inhospitable blunder of putting Michelle in a box where she would have to conform to my abstract understanding of her gender identity and her needs.

Even in the moment, my poor response to Michelle's request did not sit well with me. After the worship service that day I contacted a transgendered friend of mine and asked her for advice about how to address such an instance in the future. My fear that I had really made a mistake was further confirmed in my mind when I did not see Michelle in worship at Friends Church after that Sunday. Remembering this instance, I contacted Michelle for an interview for this study and she graciously accepted the invitation. That past incident came up during the interview and I finally received perspective outside of my own good intentions based on Michelle's recollection:

It was as more in the way you said it than what you said. If there wasn't a unisex bathroom, that is fine. That is the way it is. But it was just the way I perceived what you said was that you really didn't care. You said that there was one, but I had to go through the nursery. Okay. Where is the nursery? When I have to go through the nursery, is it okay if I do that or is it not okay? I still had no answer to my question. That was the problem.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Michelle/Michael, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor's office of Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 30 January 2011.

By failing to walk Michelle over to the nursery myself and assure her that she was perfectly welcome to walk through that area to reach what unisex restroom we did have, I effectively did not even try to offer her hospitality. Because I was nervous about not being able to accommodate Michelle in a way that I felt was acceptable, it came across to her that I did not even try. Again, notice here how worry translates into hostility on the part of the host.

Another interviewee, Paul, a 54-year-old gay male, defines hospitality in a way that might view my response to Michelle's restroom request as hostile:

I think in terms of hospitality in the church, I certainly wouldn't take it to necessarily mean that people should always agree with each other or anything like that, but we should be open and affirming to people for who they are as opposed to who we want them to be. [We should] come together at the point where we are and agree to proceed from there, as opposed to requiring that someone be different than what they are in order for us to engage with them.¹⁰⁶

Although I did not have any desire in my mind for Michelle to be someone that she was not, my response to her restroom request was tailored to what I thought she might want to hear instead of what she really needed to hear. In this context of not even trying to genuinely accommodate Michelle's needs, I came across as being hostile, only willing to accept Michelle and her needs on my conditions that she did not meet in my preconceived outlook.

Michelle's experience was that Friends Church was open to but not necessarily affirming of her. This was both on the immediate level of there not being

¹⁰⁶ Paul, face-to-face interview conducted in his office at Seton Clinical Education Center, Austin, Texas, 30 December 2010.

a visibly accessible unisex bathroom and the perpetual level of a minister's attitude of hospitality, of generally not being prepared.¹⁰⁷ Concerning pastoral care to LGBTQ people, in their book, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care*, David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager write, "Noticing means that you are aware of what is going on between the lines in your people's lives. It is frequently this space that holds the most important meanings."¹⁰⁸ When the ONA church works to increase its awareness of what it is affirming by claiming to be open to LGBTQ people, the space that resides between the lines in its LGBTQ congregants' lives expands to include everyone inside the ecclesiological sphere. Concerning transgendered people Tanis advises:

You can't just decide to "be more welcoming" after a single planning weekend. Because it is such a pervasive force in our society, gender becomes a dividing line within our congregations as well. In order to change that situation, you need to think carefully through everything that your congregation does that is gender-based or gender-specific. You will also be dealing with a community that is, at best, somewhat suspicious of your motives and fearful of condemnation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Rev. Dr. Justin Tanis offers more perspective on transgendered-friendly rest rooms and the benefits of providing such facilities in churches in *Trans-Gendered* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 128: "Congregations should look for ways in which they can have unisex rest rooms, particularly facilities for one person at a time, or provide multiple options. An increasing trend is toward the creation of multisex rest rooms (sometimes called "family rest rooms") where a daughter can comfortably escort her elderly father, a dad can take his young daughter or a mom her young son, etc. When a church creates a space for people who fit neither gender category and for people who have need for facilities for both genders in a rest room, it increases accessibility not only for the transgendered but for others as well."

¹⁰⁸ David J. Kundtz and Bernard S. Schlager, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 69.

¹⁰⁹ Tanis, 128.

Expanding free space of mutuality, care and love bolsters the church's hospitality, keeping the church vital for all people. As Sutherland asserts, "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."¹¹⁰

To discover the extent to which Friends Church is faithfully living out its ONA Statement, our congregation might take Carlos' description of hospitality and ask, "Are we a beige colored church?" Nouwen's defines the beige colored church as "the hospitable home...where father, mother and children can reveal their talents to each other, become present to each other as members of the same human family and support each other in their common struggle to live and make live."¹¹¹ Is Friends Church this hospitable home of mutuality and neutrality? Is there a family between the LGBTQ and hetero communities within its walls that supports each other in the common vision of offering God's extravagant welcome to all? Is our ONA congregation doing all that we can to listen to and accommodate the LGBTQ perspectives in our midst? In our attempt to establish an ecclesiology of hospitality, our congregation must not cease in trying to answer those questions with a resounding 'yes'! We must not grow weary in doing good.

¹¹⁰ Sutherland, 83.

¹¹¹ Nouwen, 56-57.

Making a Better Place: The Lived Experience of LGBTQ Hospitality

John and Lance got together in Bryan-College Station 24 years ago. For two gay men living in a conservative college town with a population of less than 100,000 at the time, opportunities to celebrate and nurture a newfound relationship in the public setting were sorely lacking. John and Lance recall how their friends would joke about being sucked into the Bryan-College Station vortex and not being able to escape; but the way they saw it, John and Lance figured, “You can sit here and gripe and complain all you want, or you can make it a better place.”¹¹² They share:

Lance: For us, when we first got together we threw parties all the time because we wanted it to be a better place for us to live, so we tried to make it a better place for everybody.

John: In the local community.

Lance: Right!¹¹³

John and Lance were the only couple I was fortunate enough to interview together. Their shared responses offered me a glimpse into how LGBTQ experiences shape an understanding of hospitality, and how those experiences could inform hospitality for all people in the church.

¹¹² John and Lance, interview.

¹¹³ Ibid.

I thought of John's and Lance's story when I came across this quote from Kundtz and Schlager about the tenacity of LGBTQ perspectives:

Because of their lived experience both within and outside of established communities of faith, LGBTQ people know what it means to stand courageously for who they are and for what they believe. They also know how to create and nurture family in the midst of rejection; how to care for and love friends even through illness and death; how to hang onto faith, even in the presence of persistent evil; and how to support each other faithfully and grow spiritually in the face of hatred and derision.¹¹⁴

This lived experience shares a great deal in common with that of Jesus' disciples. Those first disciples were estranged from their homes, families, friends and vocations. They were placed in situation after situation that was hostile and forced to cope, to make due, and to rely on one another to get by. However, this lived experience of the disciples veers away from the lived experience of LGBTQ people that Kundtz and Schlager describe when Jesus meets his demise. Yes, the disciples created and nurtured family in the midst of rejection, and yes, the disciples supported each other faithfully and grew spiritually in the face of hatred and derision; but then Jesus was betrayed by one of his own and handed over to the authorities. Peter disowned Jesus saying, "I don't know him!"¹¹⁵ When Jesus was crucified in public for all to see, his disciples were nowhere to be found, save the one whom Jesus loved according to John's gospel. Finally, when Jesus was taken down from the cross and laid to rest in a tomb, the disciples hid away together behind locked doors out of fear. They may have

¹¹⁴ Kundtz and Schlager, viii.

¹¹⁵ Luke 22:57

a lived experience that illustrates tenacity in the face of adversity on many counts throughout their journey of discipleship, but the disciples are perhaps most remembered by their actions surrounding Jesus' death. Ultimately, their lived experience was void of standing up courageously for whom they were and what they believed. Throughout their mission, the disciples were taught by Jesus about the mystery of faith and the joy of salvation, and they were instructed time and again to have no fear; but in the end they caved.

The LGBTQ experience is lived out in the face of society's hatred, oppression, and hostility. It is an experience that testifies to faith and deep spirituality that heed the words of Jesus, which were ultimately abandoned by his disciples, "Fear not." What would it look like for this LGBTQ experience to be lived out in the time and setting of Jesus' death? If we go back to that moment right after Jesus' burial, and back to that room in which the disciples were together behind locked doors and afraid for their very lives, how is the LGBTQ experience lived out? Perhaps we find a queer community, gathered together in that room with the doors courageously flung open wide as an invitation to create and nurture family in the midst of that present rejection. Perhaps we find LGBTQ people caring for and loving friends who are experiencing the illness of societal oppression and the death of hope. Perhaps we find unmistakable human beings who have been forced to the margins of society hanging onto faith, even in the presence of persistent evil, supporting each other faithfully and growing spiritually in the face of hatred and derision. The Gospel's good news that

Jesus is raised from the dead looks exuberantly different from this lived experience than it does from a perspective of fear safeguarded behind locked doors.

So, what would hospitality look like for the church that is open to and affirming of this lived experience of LGBTQ people? For John and Lance, it looks like growth; expanding the free space of hospitality that welcomes all people in the face of an apathetic world. This lived experience of LGBTQ people is the example of 21st century disciples who walk a walk of courageous faith despite encompassing hostility. For the ONA church, then, to affirm the lived experience of these disciples in our midst looks like growth.

DiNovo asserts:

The faithful will be called to feed and house and welcome around the table, to give over the church as we know it to its true owners, the most marginalized of all. If we can honestly say we are doing that, our queer experience is that the church will inevitably grow, because if the gift is real, it is rarely if ever refused.¹¹⁶

Ecclesiological hospitality toward LGBTQ perspectives results in a shared experience of queerness that increases the congregation in openness to all people and love for one another. DiNovo adds this compelling reflection from Matthew's gospel, "Hospitality is demanded for the disciples, those sent. If hospitality is not found, the house is not worthy to stay in (10:11-14)."¹¹⁷ While the church continues to "gripe and complain," as Lance says, about declining numbers and its loss of profundity in

¹¹⁶ DiNovo, 174.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 133.

the world's eyes, the congregation would do well to "make it a better place" and incorporate the vitality of LGBTQ perspectives into its ecclesiology so that the congregation would grow into a more authentic and relevant environment where everyone is welcomed, nurtured and loved.

Here, the Cross Still Makes a Difference: From Territorialism to Inclusion

For a portion of the interviews, I included a series of phrases that I shared with the interviewees to prompt whatever feelings might come to mind for them in as little as a word or as much as a few sentences. I often drive by a church in Bryan where the sign out front states, "Here, the cross still makes a difference." Of course, for a study that seeks LGBTQ perspectives on the nature of church hospitality, that phrase simply *had* to make the cut.

Mark is a 36-year-old gay male, and he shares an elaborative response to that phrase:

Dan: "Here, the cross still makes a difference."

Mark: I guess it depends on how you're using it. I think that's reassuring to me that it still means something and it's not just an empty symbol. That phrase also enrages me when people use it to bastardize some of the things I know to be true.

Dan: When the cross is manipulated?

Mark: Yes, when people throw it at me. This is a different example, but when people say that you shouldn't take Christ out of Christmas, and I'm like, "Well, maybe they're just holiday people!" So, when you say something like "Here, the cross still means something!" I'm like,

“Well, it may not mean that to everybody. So, stop trying to force it on people.” That just sends me into a rage.¹¹⁸

Mark voiced his frustration about the cross being confined to the church’s own interpretation of it. Along with that interpretation comes a limited perspective that often times breeds hostility. John recalls how such a narrow approach to biblical interpretation led to his break from the church:

I think that I find that as I got away from the church I looked at the Bible with more open eyes. When I was in the church it would be read to you. The Bible studies would be read for that church's interpretation of it. You were being indoctrinated more than you were being educated. It was, “This is the way that we read this passage. This is what it means.” It wasn't, “What do you think it means?” For me it was very much dogma, very much, unfortunately, oppressive.¹¹⁹

With little room for open discussion and broader interpretation, a limited concept of hospitality is formed out of which a welcome is only extended to those who meet the criteria of acceptance supposedly laid out by the Bible and the cross. Goss states:

Within Protestant and more recent Roman Catholic Christological discourse, Jesus the Christ becomes a model of heterosexuality, a foundation for legitimizing heterosexist Christian truth and social constructions on marriage and the family. Jesus the heterosexual male Christ continues the moral/political dualism that subordinates the social position of women in the church and in society and that excludes sexual variation. Jesus the Christ becomes the cultural force for legitimizing compulsory heterosexuality.¹²⁰

This becomes especially dangerous for LGBTQ people. Kundtz and Schlager note, “The assumption/belief/opinion that LGBTQ people should try to change their sexual

¹¹⁸ Mark, face-to-face interview in the pastor’s office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 13 December 2010.

¹¹⁹ John and Lance, interview.

¹²⁰ Goss, 151-152.

orientation or gender identity to conform with what is seen as ‘acceptable’ is itself one of the most serious problems they face.”¹²¹ When it comes to the church’s theological perception of the cross in this respect, the problem for LGTBQ people becomes that the difference it is believed to make is in changing the sexual orientation and gender identity of LGTBQ people to match the acceptable criteria for full inclusion and participation in ecclesiological life.

Still, what I found most surprising in this portion of the interviews was that when I introduced the phrase, ‘Here, the cross still makes a difference,’ none of the responses dealt with what particular difference was being implied there. Each interviewee shared their gut responses that mostly voiced frustration with the presumptiveness of that phrase, or that questioned the territorial nature of it. One of the interviewees responded with a sense of annoyance: “As opposed to where?”¹²² Inherent in these voices of frustration over the presumptive claims to the cross comes a question from the LGTBQ experience: “To whom does the cross truly belong?” Goss adds, “The cross is God’s invasive identification with the oppressed. The oppressed now include the sexually oppressed, those oppressed because of their sexual preference or identity.”¹²³ Goss’ assertion here bears truth, but so long as the church lays claim to rigid interpretations of the cross that divide rather than include, such a rich truth goes undiscovered by LGTBQ and hetero people alike.

¹²¹ Kundtz & Schlager, 7.

¹²² Thad, face-to-face interview at Village Café in Bryan, Texas, 5 December 2010.

¹²³ Goss, 166.

Perhaps this is a comprehensive dynamic, where the territory surrounding the cross needs to be expanded before the difference it might make can be understood. In his interview, James heard ‘Here, the cross still makes a difference’ as an arrogant phrase, and added, “I think the cross still makes a difference everywhere, not just in one place.”¹²⁴ In order to scale down that arrogance and reengage the vitality that the cross’ difference might make, it appears that the supposed owners of the cross must pick up theirs, as Christ instructs, and follow Jesus out onto the margins. This is a step toward that ecclesiology of hospitality that, by emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives, strives to bring all people into the fold of God’s justice, mercy and love.

Yvette Flunder, the senior pastor of City of Refuge United Church of Christ in San Francisco, writes, “An authentic ethic of inclusion must reach from the center to the farthest margin and work its way back. When we reach for the ones who are the least accepted, we give a clear message of welcome to everyone.”¹²⁵ In her interview, Joan, 29, who identifies as a lesbian, concurs:

There needs to be that point where a church will do what they need to do whether that means going to hang out with the homeless people on the corner, or really getting into the soup kitchens, or going to hang out at the gay bar. If you want to reach the gay community, I guarantee they’re at Halo, and I guarantee that most of the people at Halo are there because they need something, and it’s probably not what they think they need, you know what I

¹²⁴ James, interview.

¹²⁵ Yvette A. Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 25-26.

mean?¹²⁶ I think that a lot of churches kind of falter on that. It's like there's too much of the "you come to me" instead of "us coming to you."¹²⁷

Taking up our cross and going to the margins, as Rev. Flunder and Joan suggest, is a call to evangelism. That "'E' word" as it is pejoratively understood in many liberal-leaning circles of Mainline Christianity comes as a particularly important charge to the ONA congregation. "Evangelism is the activity of sharing the joy and justice of the gospel."¹²⁸ What, then, does the cross look like for the ONA congregation that would pick up theirs and follow Jesus to wherever God calls them in the community?

Evangelism for the ONA congregation becomes an act of potential revelation.

Carlos articulates:

If churches are going to be welcoming to all, then act like it; be a part of the community. What would the Baptist church do? They donate their time, money, energy and their manpower to get out and be visible and feed the poor. Show them that; show them who you are. As someone who is gay, I don't believe in the extremism in the gay community of serving ideas and shoving them down somebody else's throat. Then again I don't agree that just taking it and sitting back is the answer either. So then show them that you are no different than anyone else. If you have never been around gay people, then you are now. How different am I? How different am I? This is the way that the Lord made us.¹²⁹

For the ONA congregation, going to the margins becomes an extension of hospitality that attempts to share the joy and justice of the gospel that we celebrate as truth for all

¹²⁶ Halo is a gay-friendly bar in the downtown Bryan area.

¹²⁷ Joan, face-to-face interview in the pastor's office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 10 December 2010.

¹²⁸ Davis, 13.

¹²⁹ Carlos, interview.

people. To reach a confident, shared concept of that truth is to understand what difference the cross makes. This theological exercise of deciphering the cross and its power begins back at that center, of which Rev. Flunder speaks: the church; meaning that the ONA church, with its LGBTQ and hetero people in the congregation, must engage in a communal understanding of what that difference is that the cross makes. After all, if the ONA congregation does not understand for itself what difference the cross makes, what business does it have attempting to share it with the world?

So, what difference does the cross make to Friends Congregational Church? Being an ONA congregation means that our door is open to all people. If this culmination of diverse voices seeks to move from the center to the margins, it must approach the cross with a theology that appreciates the variance within those voices. The late theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid suggests, “Theology is for domestication and not for transformation when theological methods ask people to fit into them, and not vice versa.”¹³⁰ Flunder adds:

Oppressive theology, or a theology that welcomes those who fit a normative definition of the dominant culture while excluding those who do not, is a ball and chain on the heart of the body of Christ, and with it we keep each other in bondage.¹³¹

Seeking a theological approach to the cross that is authentic to our ONA identity requires that Friends Church engage an ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes

¹³⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 69.

¹³¹ Flunder, 7.

LGBTQ perspectives. How might such a theology interpret that difference that the cross makes as it is found in Ephesians 2:11-18, *NRSV*?:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Our theology of the cross tells us that Jesus used the cross to destroy hostility, to break down barriers that divide people on the basis of human concepts of tribe, territory and culture, and to reconcile all humankind, one to another. Reconciliation begins with hearing the voices that have been heretofore squelched by tyrannical divisions of fear that exist in our society, listening to those perspectives, and melting them into our mutual theology of the cross. Goss offers this LGBTQ voice:

For us, the political death of Jesus reveals homophobic/heterosexist power at its fullest. The cross symbolizes the political infrastructure of homophobic practice and oppression. It symbolizes the terror of internalized homophobia that has led to the closeted invisibility of gay and lesbian people. It indicates the brutal silencing, the hate crimes, the systemic violence perpetuated against us. The cross now belongs to us. We have been crucified. We have been martyred. We have been nailed to that cross by most of the Christian churches. They continue to legitimize, bless, and activate violence against us.¹³²

¹³² Goss, 166-167.

Hearing this voice brings potent conviction to the church to revisit the reconciliatory nature of the cross in which there are no longer divisions or even distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives, the church cannot justifiably view the cross and the Christian faith in binary terms. “As long as heterosexuality is seen as the norm, the best homosexuality can do is be as-good-as.”¹³³ In the context of the sacrament of Holy Communion observed within the church, Clark adds:

An intimate community is formed by an act of exclusion, “we” are in and “they” are out. The very fact that a group of people have a sense of community with one another suggests that they have drawn a boundary around themselves, that they see themselves as different from the surrounding world. The stranger threatens the foundations of such a community by blurring the boundary; the stranger must either be kept out or made to become like the community. However, when a community’s identity is being shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that community sees and understands the table as a sign of fellowship with Him and commonality with the other, the stranger can be embraced with understanding. This is the moral foundation of hospitality.¹³⁴

Removing the distinctions between male and female in the context of, as the Ephesians passage states, “access to the Father,” insists that the consequent categorization of sexuality, heterosexual and homosexual, be removed, as well. This newfound oneness is conceived in the free space that has no use for territory any longer by the nature of the cross’ liberating reconciliation. With our shared Christian faith now stomping out the hostility that once separated us, we are able to clearly see

¹³³ DiNovo, 100.

¹³⁴ Clark, 49.

together a cross that has symbolized so much oppression, terror and violence against our LGBTQ siblings. This perspective that lives into Jesus' prayer, "that they may all be one," now requires that the church ask further questions of itself:

If the genealogy of Christianity has hidden the queerness of the one at its center, how has theology denied this Christ, or has it? How has theology, whether supportive of the full membership of lesbian and gay people in the body of Christ that is the church (which should therefore include the opportunity to seek ordination) or not, denied the very queerness at its heart? If the margins are always queer, and the church should exist at the margins, why is the church so comfortably coexistent with monologic power?¹³⁵

To shift away from the heteronormative view of having territory that confines the cross and toward a queer view of expanding that space around the cross to include all people is a crucial lesson for the church's efforts in hospitality that is open to and affirming of everyone. "Hospitality does not seek uniformity, but instead, calls for unity. It is a way for the people of the world to share differences as a learning experience and to share a basic oneness, our humanity."¹³⁶ As Mark suggested in his interview, when the church says, "Here, the cross still means something," recipients of that message are quick to reply, "Well, it doesn't bear that same meaning for everyone!"¹³⁷ As Goss points out, it has certainly not had the same meaning for LGBTQ people as it has had over the centuries for straight folk.

So, what difference does the cross make? If the cross is about abolishing our binary interpretations of the law and commandments and ordinances, and it is about

¹³⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁶ Clark, 68.

¹³⁷ Mark, interview.

creating a new humanity that is reconciled, one to another, and unified in Christ, and it is about ending all hostilities that we might share mutual access to our God of justice, mercy, and love, how is that theology being lived out in and through our churches where the age old hymn is still sung, “Lift High the Cross”? The interviewees’ responses, none of which addressed what difference the cross actually makes, offer an LGBTQ perspective that asserts, “Until the boundary lines of territorialism surrounding the cross are removed and all people are brought into a shared understanding of the Christian faith, the cross makes no difference.” Ritley adds:

The open reentry of gay and lesbian people into the public life of the Christian community is a healthy return to the vitality of the early church, in which the boundaries of the legalistic first-century Hebrew religion had to be enlarged to include the despised Gentiles as equals. This, at least in part, is what the stories of gay and lesbian Christians in the 21st century will be about: the enlarging of the tent’s borders, the enriching of the community’s fabric. It is also about vocally claiming a separate and legitimate identity in the church: not simply flawed heterosexuals, but God’s gay people, God’s gay tribe, bearing gifts the church truly needs, even when it least wants them.¹³⁸

In his interview, Thad a 21-year-old bisexual male, articulates how important it is that churches work to expand their perspective:

Thad: I just don’t really want to fight. I don’t want to have to ask the church if they’re open to homosexuality. I just came out to my parents, and religion played a big part in them being pretty shocked. Going back to my experiences in the church, I talked to my youth minister about questioning my sexuality, and we talked about it for a little bit. He said, “One day this won’t be a problem.” I talked to my pastor about it, too, and I went through some online counseling for it. And, looking back, it just made it worse. That was terrible!

¹³⁸ Countryman and Ritley, 16.

Dan: When they were saying it wouldn't be a problem in the future...

Thad: That I would be straight. Looking at it now, it makes me mad a little bit to even have the option of counseling to be straight. I feel like it's institutionalized homophobia, the fact that it's even there, that they say it's a problem and it can't be accepted. So, if the church actually wants to reach out to the queer community, then they're going to have to get rid of that.

Dan: So, do you associate institutionalized homophobia with the church?

Thad: Yes, I do. And I know that there's different sects and different denominations that are more accepting than others, but if you were to ask for a blanket statement, yeah, I do.¹³⁹

Churches have the mountainous task ahead of them of changing the outlooks of those like Thad's, but it begins by demonstrating purposeful hospitality to LGBTQ people in listening to their perspectives on matters of theology.

We in the church assume that we are experts on the difference that the cross can make, but our LGBTQ siblings harbor profound theological gifts in their lived experience that have the power to open our eyes to the cross in life-changing ways.

Clark adds:

It is the ultimate aim of the church's witness in the world to bring about transformation where it exists. Moreover, in any effort that the church undertakes, whether it is in the area of stewardship, evangelism, mission or social justice, the ultimate aim is to make known the rule of God through the person of Jesus Christ. This is no less true of how one comes to understand hospitality as a practice of ministry that shapes persons for their everyday existence in the world.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Thad, interview.

¹⁴⁰ Clark, 40.

The biblical principles of hospitality call upon the church to receive those gifts, those lived experiences and those perspectives of LGBTQ people in order to more fully understand the power of our faith we share in Jesus Christ. If the church cannot embrace the transformative nature of the cross within its own walls by emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives, then the cross that it takes up makes little difference to the world the church seeks to change by one act of love at a time.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE INTERVIEWS, PART TWO: THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

Few things demand more genuine bravery than letting what goodness we have be what it is. We tamper constantly with the truth. Dress it up, we think; it's not quite enough. Tone it down, we reason; it's a little much. It's risky to see self as it is. In fact, we can't accept the truth about ourselves until someone we trust says, "It's all right." God knows us. Knows beneath the games we play. While God does not condone evil, God loves us as we are. If God can stand the truth, maybe we can. The truth is the only point from which to grow. Experiencing God's love not only allows us to stand ourselves as we are, it inspires us to become the person we are destined to be.

—Browning Ware¹⁴¹

Let's Be Authentic and See Where It Takes Us

I did not have the privilege of interviewing Greg Chapman, but I did get to read his story in a collection of essays published by NPR called *This I Believe*. Greg was raised to be a good Baptist and a patriotic American, to believe that Catholics were idol-worshippers, that liberals were communists, and that blacks were inferior to whites. He was also taught that homosexuality was a terrible demon that drove people to impurity and ultimately to hell. So, when Greg began struggling with his sexuality and succumbing to his “unholy thoughts,” who he was and how he was raised were suddenly at odds with one another:

¹⁴¹ Browning Ware, *Diary of a Modern Pilgrim: Life Notes from One Man's Journey* (Austin, TX: Imago Dei Publications, 2003), 126.

I came to believe that I was an abomination, a thing hated by God. In search of a wife, I tried a dating service. Defeated, I waited for someone to take pity and love me. The idea of faking who I was to satisfy others turned my stomach. I came to believe that if I punished myself enough, God would show mercy and cure me of my wrongness.¹⁴²

Greg chronicled his experience of living in the closet. His Bible group said that they kicked someone out for refusing to stop being gay, which instantly placed Greg in hostile territory. His family wondered why he was not dating and asked what was wrong with him. At that point, he was 35 years old and only had a handful of hugs to speak of for physical intimacy in his lifetime. But then, Greg's story took a turn toward authenticity that he describes as shedding those beliefs he had been taught growing up and taking on new ways of looking at the world:

I started to love myself and to believe the Divine did so as well. As that belief strengthened...I began to love others, and I was loved back. The racism I grew up with faded. The more I loved myself, the more beauty I saw in everyone else.¹⁴³

This journey toward embracing his true self led Greg to be joined with his life partner of more than five years, to becoming an Episcopalian, and to replanting his political beliefs. Greg's process of coming out as a gay man in the midst of so much hostility is his journey toward authenticity.

I did get to interview Joan, a 29-year-old female. Authenticity is something that is very important to Joan, and it is also how she describes embracing her own

¹⁴² Greg Chapman, "A Journey Toward Acceptance and Love," eds. Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (New York: NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 32.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

sexual identity and coming out as a lesbian. In 2007, Joan was working as a youth minister in a Baptist church. She was aware of her sexual orientation, but given her church's stance against homosexuality, Joan opted to remain in the closet:

It was a real struggle because I wasn't exactly being authentic, I mean, granted I wasn't dating anybody while I was doing youth ministry, but I didn't feel like I was really being true to myself, and I was like, "I can keep doing this ministry and be happy in that aspect of my life, but there's this whole other side that's 24/7," whereas the youth ministry part of it wasn't 24/7. Youth ministry was great, but I just was not happy because I wasn't living the life that I wanted to live.¹⁴⁴

It was at this point in her life that Joan met Liz. The relationship took off, and Joan decided it was "time to be real." Joan resigned her youth ministry position to live more fully into her sexual orientation and her newfound relationship with Liz: "I was like, 'Alright, let's do this! Let's be authentic and see where it takes us.'"¹⁴⁵

For LGBTQ people, the process of coming out is a journey toward authenticity. This process looks differently for every LGBTQ individual. Sometimes the journey toward authenticity is as gut-wrenching as it was for Greg Chapman, and sometimes it includes a burst of confident joy, as in Joan's case. The details may vary from person to person and story to story, but the journey toward authenticity is the consistent gift that the LGBTQ perspective brings to the church. M.R. Ritley testifies:

Each of the gay men and women who can stand up and say who they are is an icon for each of the other human beings who do not yet have the courage to be who they are, or who have the suspicion that they are someone other than they have been taught they are. And this extends far, far beyond sexual identity.

¹⁴⁴ Joan, interview.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

It's a very scary thing to challenge the received wisdom of one's entire culture, which is why we are both the terror and the envy of straight people. In a world in as much conflict as ours is, one thing that is desperately needed is the visible presence of people who are not afraid to challenge received wisdom, which is turning people into economic drones, destroying our environment, and pressing the vast majority of human beings to the margins because they have the wrong language, color, or gender.¹⁴⁶

This queer gift of authenticity that the church would be blessed to receive transcends binary categorization and empowers the entire congregation, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, to see themselves as made in God's image, and to come out in all areas of their life as courageous disciples of God's greatest gift of love, Jesus Christ.

This transcendent authenticity can be found in the 2005 film, *Transamerica*, where Felicity Huffman plays the character of Bree, an MTF transsexual. Bree is one surgery away from completing SRS and becoming the woman she so desperately wants to be on the outside. However, before her psychiatrist will sign off on Bree having this final surgery, Bree must reach out to the son she just discovered that she had from a past relationship. Despite the title of the film and the main character being a transgendered person, the movie's message is not solely about transgendered issues; rather, it offers that gift of authenticity from the LGBTQ perspective that is true for everyone. In an interview with Felicity Huffman and the director of the film, Duncan Tucker, the two explain:

Huffman: I think one of the things that's brilliant about the script is it's not an issue movie; because the only issue you could say is,

¹⁴⁶ Countryman and Ritley, 70-71.

you know, “Transgendered people are individuals, too.” And you go, “Great. What are you going to do with the other 120 minutes of your movie?” [Duncan Tucker] wrote a great script which is about becoming who you really are. It’s a woman’s journey. She thinks the biggest thing she can do is become a woman, and she realizes the biggest thing she can do is become a parent. I think the internal story is something we all can relate to, because we all want to become who we really are. We all want to come home to ourselves and be seen by our family, by our community, by our lovers as our true selves.

Tucker: I think everybody has, at some point in their lives, felt uncomfortable in their skin; misunderstood and not perfectly held by the universe. And that’s what Bree’s journey is. Bree is just the same misfit, outsider kid we’ve all felt ourselves to be at some point or another in our life, but the volume is turned up to ten because of who she is.¹⁴⁷

Bree’s process of coming out not only as a woman, but also as a mother, exemplifies the LGBTQ gift of authenticity that serves to prod the church toward coming out itself with a more authentic hospitality.

Freddy James Clark writes, “Hospitality as a ministerial practice and a public way of life must be grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁸ For the church, this is the authenticity in which it is rooted, and out of which it must grow if it is to live out its true identity. Clark continues:

The church has been given its orders, how it should live as a hospitable community in the world. The church has a moral and biblical obligation associated with hospitality. God’s people, then, are called to be imitators of God. We have been recipients of God’s grace and care. In turn we are to act as

¹⁴⁷ Felicity Huffman and Duncan Tucker, “A Conversation with Felicity Huffman and Duncan Tucker,” Duncan Tucker, Director, *Transamerica*, 2005

¹⁴⁸ Clark, 39.

God Himself would mercifully act toward those who are aliens and strangers.¹⁴⁹

For Michelle, ecclesiological hospitality that is grounded in the gospel's good news shows authenticity in whether it affirms her as a transgendered individual who identifies as female:

Michelle: Don't say you are a Christian and live differently.

Dan: Okay. You mentioned a lot about authenticity: "follow the Bible," "walk the walk," "talk the talk." So, when it comes to receiving Michelle, receiving you for who you are, is that an articulation for you of a church being true to what we are supposed to be doing, true to who we are?

Michelle: Yeah. Yes!¹⁵⁰

Michelle and all LGBTQ people's feet are held to the fire on a constant basis by a society that forces them to make decisions about whether and to what extent they will live authentically in the world, "out" as their true selves. It is this lived experience that LGBTQ people thankfully bring to an ecclesiology of hospitality; because the LGBTQ perspective of authenticity holds the church's feet to the fire, holding the congregation accountable to its rootedness in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ritley adds this LGBTQ perspective:

Our sexual orientation—or rather our whole life experience, which includes our sexual orientation—has actually been the occasion of our faith coming awake and giving us life. We bring to the churches, then a perspective that

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁵⁰ Michelle/Michael, interview.

renews and revives the central message of the gospel, the good news that forms the foundation for everything that is legitimately Christian.¹⁵¹

To live according to the gospel, to identify by the beatitudes, to work for the peace demanded by God's prophets, and to truly love others as Jesus loved everyone is a radically countercultural and even dangerous existence; but this is what God requires of the church if we are to live authentically. That authenticity is understood more fully when the church embraces hospitality toward LGBTQ perspectives. I offer this example from my interview with Lily:

Dan: In your opinion, how can we at Friends Congregational Church improve as a church?

Lily: Don't be the one who is there to maintain the status quo. Don't be the one who just maintains the mainstream social power, whatever it is. Don't be the one who actually fosters people using those power structures.¹⁵²

Voices like Lily's loudly remind the church of its Spirit-founded, gospel-rooted identity and implore that the church be authentic and come out for the sake of God's justice, mercy, and love.

Coming out requires that the church first discover its true self. For the ONA congregation, this means being able to visibly witness to the implications of affirming LGBTQ people within the church. Kundtz and Schlager describe this process in terms of LGBTQ people coming out:

¹⁵¹ Countryman and Ritley, 5-6.

¹⁵² Lily, interview.

No one can come out of the closet as queer, embrace their own identity, or proclaim it to their world unless they are first able to imagine themselves doing and being all those things. The imagining must precede the realities...Freedom from the closet must begin in the imagination of the person. If you cannot imagine it, you cannot achieve it.¹⁵³

In the words of one of my predecessors at Friends Church, Rev. Charles Stark, who helped our congregation reach the decision to become an ONA church in 1996, “We have to make it a big deal in here so that it won’t be a big deal out there.”

Making the church’s ONA identity a big deal within its own walls is another vital component to authenticity; it is the imagining that precedes reality. This is perhaps no more true than in the eyes of LGBTQ people who might come in response to the church’s ONA Statement. Matthew, a 29-year-old gay male, who left the Church of Christ, the denomination of his upbringing, eight years ago and who has not darkened the door of a church since, comments:

If a church says they accept people, or are trying to, I think the proof is in the pudding. If the people are there and feel welcomed that are considered to be ‘different’ by society, I would say that’s a good indicator of a truly welcoming church.¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁵

Joan adds:

You say that you’re open and affirming, but if you don’t have gay people on staff or gay lay leaders or quote “different” types, it doesn’t really seem real. But with this church, I don’t know what [your minister of spiritual development’s] sexuality is, but she seems like she would be “different,” and I

¹⁵³ Kundtz and Schlager, 72.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor’s office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 6 December 2010.

¹⁵⁵ To be clear, the denominational church that Matthew left was not the United Church of Christ (UCC) but, in fact, the Church of Christ.

like it; it definitely proves it.¹⁵⁶ And that's the thing now, especially with people my age and younger: Anything you say you have to prove it, and churches have to prove it. So, don't get a whole staff of middle-aged white guys with goatees, you know? Get the pastor with the KISS t-shirt, you know? Shake it up if you really want it to be different, because people will go in and look and observe, and what they observe is more real than any words that can come out of your mouth.¹⁵⁷

I would like to add here that this pastor has a wardrobe capable of accommodating him wearing KISS garb every day of the week!

Joan brings up an all-too-true reality for all churches regarding the dire need for authenticity. Joan is 29 years old, and she points out that her generation of so-called Millennials is the church of tomorrow's doubting Thomas that needs to see it to believe it. Thad is 21 years old and has not had a need for church for a few years now. Concerning the authenticity of churches that strive to incorporate diversity in their congregations, he remarks:

If the church wanted the 'different' people there, then they would need people who were white, black, Hispanic, Chinese, all that stuff; and then people who were openly homosexual, bisexual, transgendered. They need to be there for me to believe that church actually is open.¹⁵⁸

For Friends Congregational Church and all ONA churches, the identity of being ONA puts the congregation out on a limb and forces us to demonstrate, perhaps more than churches who do not officially state their openness to all people, the authenticity of

¹⁵⁶ Our Minister of Spiritual Development identifies as lesbian. Unfortunately, as of February 1st of this year, she has taken a position elsewhere. Joan's comment here provides yet another reason why our minister of spiritual development's absence creates a gap in the church's leadership.

¹⁵⁷ Joan, interview.

¹⁵⁸ Thad, interview.

that identity. In this capacity, the Millennial LGBTQ perspective in particular serves as that much more potent a reminder to the ONA church that it must consistently make its identity visible within its own walls if it hopes to be truly hospitable to the diversity of God's people.

As I stated before, that aspect of ecclesiology that is hospitable toward LGBTQ people is crucial to the impression upon anyone who would come in response to the church's ONA Statement. In 2004, the United Church of Christ ran a TV ad that is known as "the velvet rope commercial" (It can be found on the UCC's official website at www.ucc.org or on Youtube). This commercial was a joyous revelation for Patti:

I think about the commercial a few years back that the UCC had about gay people that said, "All are welcome." They had that line where you couldn't get into the club. I was very impressed by that campaign, because I immediately identified with what they were saying there. It's like you go some places where they say "all are welcome," and that's really not the case. But to come into a place where that really *is* the case, it's like, "Finally."¹⁵⁹

However, workshops like the one I attended at the UCC's 2009 General Synod, and various UCC conference and association meetings I have also attended serve as reminders that not all UCC churches have adopted ONA statements.

As of today, only a little over 22 percent of the UCC churches in the South Central Conference, which covers all of Texas and parts of Louisiana and Mississippi, are "Open and Affirming." This is a frightening thought for anyone who would darken the door of a UCC congregation anticipating what might be behind that velvet

¹⁵⁹ Patti, interview.

rope. Even within the ONA church, however, that curious perspective needs to be addressed. I raised questions about the ad in a sermon I preached at Friends Church on April 6, 2006:

It's a brilliant ad that speaks very candidly to the human condition, but it's an incomplete depiction of our society. The ad explains the tragedy of what happens when we don't accept one another, and when we deny anyone in God's creation entry into God's house. But I'd like to see part two of that ad. A follow-up to that UCC ad would have to deal with what happens during the church service that ensues behind the velvet rope. What happens in God's house when the beautiful human mind that God grants God's people is left unchallenged? What happens in God's house when human minds and hearts are left stagnating in the tragic confines of what they know in this world, understanding nothing of how things could and should be in God's world? The tragedy is not what happens in God's house but what *doesn't* happen in God's house.¹⁶⁰

The ONA Statement might be an ambiguous statement for a majority of the public outside the walls of UCC churches, but to those who are tuning in, LGBTQ and hetero people alike, it is a statement that stresses an intentional welcome to LGTBQ people: "I think churches that use that language have had a thoughtful approach to it."¹⁶¹ Still, if the ONA Statement does not deliver, if the church is open to all people but only affirming of some, then the church lacks authenticity; an authenticity that is perceived by those observing the church as a lack of Christian love:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my

¹⁶⁰ Dan De Leon, "The Weeds Among Us," a sermon preached at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 6 April 2006.

¹⁶¹ Paul, interview.

possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NRSV).

If the ONA church has an unconditional welcome followed up by inauthentic affirmation of and hospitality toward all of God's people, then the welcome is nothing.

The following exchange in an interview with Paul shows his brush with a lack of authenticity on the part of a church whose leadership claimed to be loving. Paul is a part-time professional organist, and he had been playing frequently at this church when the news of his sexual orientation was made known:

Dan: If you don't mind me prying a little bit on an example you gave, when you mentioned you being told you were no longer welcome, how was that conveyed to you, how did that transpire?

Paul: Well, the music director since I had been playing there a lot approached me and said, "We've been told [that you are gay], is that true?" And I said, "Yes, that is true." And he was trying to be friendly, you know. He said, "Well, you know, if it were just up to the pastor and me, it would be okay, but it's really not, and people would be upset." I thought, "You fucking moron. If it really was okay with you, then stand up for your principles. If it's not, then don't lie to me." So, that apart from just the content of it, the way that it was conveyed, I found very irritating too.¹⁶²

This exchange shows not only a lack of authenticity, but a lack of spiritual depth on the part of this church and its leadership; because the degree to which a church offers hospitality reveals the depth of its spirituality.¹⁶³ Homan and Pratt add:

You can't ignore people when God is looking out their eyes at you. In the tiresome, the invalid, the rebellious, we are faced with God. It is our own

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Johnson, 41.

failures to love that we have to deal with when we talk of hospitality. Hospitality cuts through the sham of our excuses.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps the music director in Paul's story would not have so easily insisted that Paul leave the church if that music director's spirituality and rootedness in the gospel of Jesus Christ were deeper; consequently, his hospitality might have been more authentic and he would have been able to stand up for his principles, to stand up for the least of these, to stand up for the presence of Christ standing right in front of him in the beautiful gift of Paul to that church.

The LGBTQ experience in authentic living could be a shot in the arm to the church that is steered by good deeds of hospitality that are void of love. As DiNovo warns, "Whenever we, at church, think we really know what hospitality looks like, someone will come along and question that."¹⁶⁵ Joan shares her experience from a church she attended in her past:

I think churches have a really hard time consistently living out the values that they preach. One of the churches I went to, they would do ministries for people who were broke. They would fill up their gas tanks, but working in the church office, you would hear them joke about how disgusting that person was or, "I can't believe we have to do this again," and I'm like, "Really? Really? Why do it? Why put on the show?" They are really good about caring for their people if they want to, but they are also equally fake. The inauthentic dealings with the public are what really reflect negatively on them. Authenticity is pretty important.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Homan and Pratt, 5.

¹⁶⁵ DiNovo, 146.

¹⁶⁶ Joan, interview.

For the ONA congregation, taking into account the lived experience of LGBTQ people deepens human spirituality that then appreciates the fullness of God revealed in all people. This spiritual depth expands and authenticates a hospitality that strives to make the love of Jesus Christ visible and palpable. Homan and Pratt add, “The biggest obstacle to hospitality is not the state of the world. It is the state of our minds and hearts.”¹⁶⁷ In his interview, James asserts:

I think hospitality is a symptom, a result of everything else being right within a church; because if a church is not hospitable, if a church is not prepared to be welcoming, then I think that’s a symptom of something far worse, which is that the attitude of the body is in the wrong place. And if the hearts of the body are in the wrong place then something’s off, something’s messed up. So I don’t think it’s even possible for all of the other essentials to be there and hospitality not. I think you’re missing something else if hospitality’s missing.¹⁶⁸

It is an incredible testimony to the UCC that our denomination put together such a bold, challenging ad with the velvet rope TV commercial; however, the ad addresses the state of the world. Now, it is up to UCC congregations to address the state of our minds and hearts, to ask ourselves whether we are offering true hospitality to LGBTQ people. Thankfully, Friends Church has carried out this task to an extent, and that has reached beyond the effect of the TV ad. John explains in his interview:

I will say this: the people who have tried to get Lance and me to go to Friends Church, they have tried to make us aware that it would be a welcoming environment and everything. Anybody who is trying to attract others, they

¹⁶⁷ Homan and Pratt, 16.

¹⁶⁸ James, interview.

have to develop a reputation, and that is what sells you more than any advertising that you do. Especially when you are working in a smaller community, your word of mouth is going to get around that “this is the group that not only says that they are going to do this, but they live it.”¹⁶⁹

In other words, if we have a TV ad that raises eyebrows and draws the masses to our church’s doors, but we do not have authentic hospitality, we gain nothing.

Love is that gospel principle that compels the ONA congregation to do all of these things that the aforementioned LGBTQ voices suggest we do in order to demonstrate authentic hospitality. Those deeds that attempt to show an extravagant welcome to all do not precede love; rather, love is the authentic core from which all acts of Christian kindness, generosity, and justice are derived. For Lily, this defines the true church:

One of the major themes of the Bible is to love other people. If a church is being unwelcoming to people who are different—and putting this into a social context, these people are also being discriminated against in society—and the church doesn’t give support that these people cannot get from anywhere else, that’s not love. It’s not love if you exclude people who are different. So, from my definition, this would not be a true church.¹⁷⁰

Notice that for Lily exclusion is determined not on a basis of openness, but on a basis of affirmation. As Linda Goldman shares from the voice of a 15-year-old girl, Jane, who is a lesbian, “Where are my allies? I don’t need to know that you are my ally; I need you to BE an ally.”¹⁷¹ To affirm the lived experiences of LGBTQ people within an ecclesiology of hospitality is to embrace and live the gospel message of Christian

¹⁶⁹ John and Lance, interview.

¹⁷⁰ Lily, interview.

¹⁷¹ Goldman, 136.

love. That love is authentic, and authenticity has the power to enact change, to transform lives and to give the church a prophetic voice of relevance in the 21st century. Clark reminds us:

When the church forgets the truth of its identity, an identity that is shaped by the stories of the exodus-resurrection, memory is lost leading to silent partnering with the injustices in the world. When the contemporary church becomes so enculturated to the American ethos, it loses its power to transform the culture, because it has lost its capacity to remember.¹⁷²

To spark our ecclesiological memory of being rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ that knows no barriers, boundaries or conditions, our ONA congregations would do well to heed Joan's advice: "Let's be authentic and see where it takes us."

Body Damage: The Cost of Being Inauthentic

Recently I had the privilege of attending the annual open house of Texas A&M University's GLBT Resource Center. Their department was following the "decades" theme, so the GLBT Resource Center represented the 1970's by celebrating a world of "Pure Imagination," inspired by the 1971 film classic, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. The director of the Resource Center was dressed as Willy Wonka and student workers for the center were dressed as Oompa Loompas. Marshmallows and Rice Krispie Treats waited to be dipped in a chocolate fountain right next to a basket full of rainbow-colored lollipops. Students filled the room wall

¹⁷² Clark, 64.

to wall, and there was a shared sense of playful excitement all around the place. After visiting with a few friends, I started looking around the walls at all of the posters and artwork that captured the Resource Center's identity. That was when Chuck came up and kindly introduced himself to me.

Chuck had heard about my doctoral study from friends of friends who had participated in the interviews or who knew that I was conducting them. Given his own upbringing and active involvement in church life in the past, Chuck was genuinely interested in what I was doing. I told him the title of the study and explained what that meant in the context of Friends Church. I stressed my feeling that LGBTQ and hetero people needed to do more than simply coexist and be one another's acquaintances within the ONA church; that they would do well to be in more purposeful community with one another by emphasizing the often silenced LGBTQ experiences lost in a highly heteronormative society. I could tell that Chuck's mind was percolating. When I reached a comma, he responded with refreshing theological reflection.

Chuck understood my doctoral study in terms of the body of Christ as articulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is

honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.¹⁷³

He stressed how the church needed unity if it were ever going to be effective in its mission, and that dismissing LGBTQ perspectives was the ecclesiological blunder of cutting off its own nose to spite its face. Chuck said, “If one part of the body suffers, that being the queer community not being incorporated into the full life and mission of the congregation, then the whole church suffers, the whole church is unhealthy.” Chuck went on to express his opinion on how the church’s hostility toward homosexuals is the only reason why our country is lagging in recognizing equal rights for all LGBTQ people. It came as no surprise to me that Chuck no longer belonged to any church nor had he for quite some time.

Chuck is an integral part of the body of Christ that is now lost on the church. While Chuck did not say that it was his sexual orientation that initially drove him away, he did make it clear that the church’s stance against homosexuality offers him no reason whatsoever to return. The extent of my relationship with Chuck to date has lasted for the duration of that ten-minute conversation and our subsequent connection on Facebook, but from those exchanges alone, I already recognize the spiritual and theological depth of this man who I view as the ear or the eye or the feet now dismembered from the body of Christ.

Who knows the extent of body damage the church has suffered for centuries as a result of its discrimination against LGBTQ people? The congregation of Friends

¹⁷³ 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 18-21, 26-27, *NRSV*.

Church is sensitive to this question, but perhaps we hear it as rhetorical when it should be a serious call to further questioning of our ecclesiology of hospitality. Yes, Friends Church is ONA, and a significant number of our membership is composed of LGBTQ people; but looking around the room at the “Pure Imagination” open house of more than 50 LGBTQ people, I saw only a handful of folks who had visited Friends Church before to my knowledge and only one individual who was a member of our congregation. If we are one of only two openly welcoming congregations in town to LGBTQ people, why are more of these students and faculty not darkening our door? This is not to say that our church should not rest until every last person in that room is a member of Friends Church, not at all. That is a hostile interpretation of evangelism in and of itself. However, it does beg the question, “To what extent has the church’s hostility toward LGBTQ people caused the people in this room to have no reason to ever attend a church?” This is the cost of the church’s body damage.

I explained how LGBTQ people offer the gift of authenticity to the church through a lived experience that struggles constantly with being true to oneself. This perspective resonates with an ecclesiology that seeks to be authentically hospitable toward all people. Inversely, inauthentic hospitality is that which forgets its rootedness in the gospel of Jesus Christ that requires unity and the sharing of all the people’s gifts throughout for the sake of communal health and wholeness. This spiritual amnesia of the church disregarding its own foundation is what leads to the ecclesiological body damage of cutting off LGBTQ people—their lives, perspectives and gifts—from the body of Christ. Attending the “Pure Imagination” open house, I

wondered, “All of this creativity, all of this laughter and joy, all of these exuberant conversations, all of this energy. Does the church really have even the slightest idea how unhealthily incomplete the body of Christ is when it does nothing to actively engage LGBTQ perspectives?”

What follows are the experiences of some of the interviewees who were brave and kind enough to share their stories with this humbled pastor. However, their testimonies reveal only a fraction of the church’s body damage committed against LGBTQ people and, consequently, against itself. It is noteworthy that only one of the 12 individuals I interviewed is affiliated with a community of faith. Some of the reasons for why that might be are revealed in their stories. I share accounts of their experiences with the church’s inauthentic hospitality so that we might learn the crucial importance of always engaging LGBTQ voices and never taking them for granted; for if one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers together with it.

Coming Out of the Ecclesiological Closet

Joan is disappointed in God. When she needed help from God the most, God was not there. Joan clarifies this in terms of the church being absent in her time of need, and the church being the utmost representation of God in her life at that time. It was her “dark night of the soul” moment, and the people of God who conveyed that ever present help in times of trouble for Joan throughout her life were nowhere to be found. Joan says:

When I was a youth minister I used to ask the kids, “What’s the one thing that would happen in your life that would utterly shake your faith?” I always thought that it was if my brother ever got hate crimed, because he is a very openly gay male. I always thought that that was my one thing; turns out it wasn’t. My one thing was this.¹⁷⁴

Joan’s partner Liz and she lived together with Liz’s 8-year-old son. Liz came down with a bad cold and decided to take a warm bath. While she was in the tub, she had a seizure. Joan was napping in the other room when Liz’s son found his mother motionless in the tub. Not knowing what was wrong, he woke Joan up and told her, “Mommy fell asleep in the bathtub.”¹⁷⁵ Joan raced to the bathroom, pulled Liz out of the tub, and proceeded to perform CPR. Liz was in the hospital for six days before she died. Joan was devastated and filled with questions for God

After having experienced a mission trip to Africa where she witnessed people being miraculously healed, and where she saw the power of prayer with her own eyes, she was now praying more fervently than ever, hoping against all odds that Liz would recover. When Liz died, Joan was left confused, frustrated and disappointed. Mixed in with this moment that was “utterly shaking her faith,” Joan felt alone.

When Joan began her relationship with Liz, she had resigned her position in youth ministry at the church assuming that the church’s views against homosexuality would mean that she would not be received warmly on the ministerial staff any

¹⁷⁴ Joan, interview.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

longer, but Joan did not realize how much more distant the church had gone from her on account of her sexual orientation than she had anticipated:

Up until the point when I had been openly gay, I had this huge support system; and then in the midst of all that, the only people that were around were my gay friends, and I really just couldn't wrap my brain about how that worked. I think more than anything that one experience transformed my view of God and of the church simultaneously. Don't get me wrong, I don't have a negative view of God, I'm just a little disappointed in him. I don't hate God. I'm not angry with God. I'm just very confused with God, and I think it's definitely opened my eyes to some things, about how things are. Those are my church experiences as a whole I guess.¹⁷⁶

Concerning Joan's lack of comfort during her bereavement, God did not let Joan down, the church did. Joan is fully aware of this, but now she is left outside the walls of the church to sift through and wrestle with her confusion, frustration and disappointment, while the theology of the church that dismisses Joan's spiritual struggle on account of her sexual orientation goes unchallenged and unchanged. This is an extent of the body damage inflicted on the body of Christ when LGBTQ experiences go unnoticed.

Hearing stories like these might bring a change of heart to the compassionate soul, but until the oppressive theology that keeps Joan's story and the like from being heard inside the church changes with utmost apology and humility toward LGBTQ people, the church will not know how to respond to the Joans in our midst when their faith is utterly shaken and their souls are filled with confusion, frustration and disappointment. In other words, failing to reexamine theologies that omit LGBTQ

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

perspectives will keep the church hospitably impotent toward LGBTQ people in their time of need no matter how moved the compassionate congregant might be by the tragedy of a situation like Joan's. To show authentic hospitality toward someone requires that the human heart see the person in need for who they are fully and completely. Just as God loves us wholly and yearns for nothing less than our whole heart, we who love God are required to love our neighbor in like manner by striving to show hospitality to others and all that they are, their whole self.

Patti was raised in the church, and s/he recalls her/his negative experience in that setting being a constant one. S/he shares:

I would hear this over and over at various Southern Baptist churches when I was growing up, and it was coming from the pulpit, that when it comes to homosexuality, you can—let's see if I can get this right—you can love the sinner, but hate the sin. I would think, "Well, on the one hand they are saying that they love homosexuals, but really they hate who I am." That was always troubling to me, and I can remember hearing that message a lot.¹⁷⁷

Matthew recalls a similar experience and how it ultimately led to his break from the church eight years ago:

The thing I struggled with the most in addition to my sexuality was that I hated the idea that I was doing things wrong; that I was constantly sinning and constantly having to be forgiven for those sins. And while Jesus is an important figure, I thought it was completely unfair that we were supposed to live up to an expectation of perfection but that everyone knew that it was an impossible achievement, yet we are still kind of held to it. So, I felt that cycle of sinning and forgiveness was actually bringing me down, and I think it was for others as well.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Patti, interview.

¹⁷⁸ Matthew, interview.

How often can someone be forgiven for who they are before they either come to a renewed understanding of who they are, their identity, as God's gift to them, or they cave under the weight of never being able to achieve perfection in God's eyes?

Kundtz and Schlager implore:

For a moment, imagine living in a world in which what seems like your very being is questioned and found to be wanting—if not downright evil. Such a response would have a strong effect on anyone. The “closet” seems safe, quiet, and peaceful by comparison. The problem, of course, is that it is also dark, hidden, and can be lonely—and ultimately not a healthy choice.¹⁷⁹

Joan was out of the closet but lonelier than she perhaps had ever been when her beloved partner was gone and the church was not present to comfort her in her hour of need. If the church hopes to offer authentic hospitality to LGBTQ people, then it must follow their lead and come out of the closet with them; the ecclesiological closet that insists upon hiding from the shameful truth that adhering to a theology that hates someone's sexuality is accountable to any and all hatred, hostility and violence toward LGBTQ people.

When it comes to hospitality that strives to include LGBTQ people, it is impossible to love the sinner and hate the sin, because embracing such a theology finds the church refusing God's gifts. Ritley offers this LGBTQ perspective:

We must understand quite clearly what is our problem and what is not, and politely but resolutely hand the heterosexual community its problem back. Our love, our desire, is not a problem, but a gift, one of the greatest pieces of God's grace we can know. Being gay is not a sin, nor a sickness, but God's gift to us.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Kundtz and Schlager, 54.

Given that the church community is encouraged to share their gifts with the congregation to strengthen the church and fulfill its mission, what would ecclesiological hospitality look like that understood sexual orientation and gender identity as God's gifts?

Hospitality that outgrows the oppressive theology of loving the sinner but hating the sin does not simply tolerate LGBTQ lived experiences, it embraces them, learns from them, and applies them to the church's own preparedness for all people's moments of grief and loss. Although Joan did not stress her needs in terms of practicality, she was in a situation for six days during which her partner was hospitalized. Additionally, her partner was incapable of mothering her 8-year-old child during that time, and ultimately Liz's death left Joan as the child's immediate primary caregiver. In their book, *Policy Issues Affecting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families*, Sean Cahill and Sarah Tobias offer this insight:

Among the many rights to which heterosexual parents are automatically entitled but lesbian and gay partners are routinely denied are the ability to visit hospitalized loved ones; the right to make medical, legal, and financial decisions for an incapacitated partner; the right to take time from work to care for an ill partner; access to health insurance of one's partner and the partner's children; and the right to make funeral arrangements for a deceased partner. Even when same-sex partners are eligible for domestic partner health benefits, they have to report this as income and pay taxes on it. Another crucial health-related policy concern is gay partners' inability to sue for wrongful death in most jurisdictions.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Countryman and Ritley, 28.

¹⁸¹ Cahill and Tobias, 36.

Does the church have healthcare workers or medical professionals who would be prepared to help people like Joan should their loved ones ever become hospitalized? Does the church have social workers prepared to intervene on a child's behalf in the event that their LGBTQ parent or parents are incapacitated? Does the church have lawyers or legal counsel prepared to advise LGBTQ partners and families and to advocate on their behalf when end-of-life issues surface? Such questions and more are required of an ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ concerns.

It is not too late for the church to show Joan hospitality, to come out of the ecclesiological closet and be her advocate and companion. Her dark night of the soul has passed, but questions of confusion, frustration and disappointment about God linger for her, and perhaps they will arise for her deceased partner's son as he gets older. While ONA congregations can make efforts at being more prepared for crises in LGBTQ people's lives after learning from stories like Joan's, the church can also work now to offer healing and reconciliation for areas of emotional and spiritual pain experienced by LGBTQ people at the hands of the church. Kundtz and Schlager suggest, "A comment as simple as 'You know, I'm really sorry for how the religious community has hurt you,' can be an effective way to begin a process to undo decades of pain and enter into a healing relationship."¹⁸² Perhaps such gestures of ecclesiological hospitality toward LGBTQ experiences might also provide more space in which Patti, Matthew, Joan and so many others can express their troubles

¹⁸² Kundtz and Schlager, 52.

with God. That honest expression is what nurtures and strengthens theology and what serves to empower the church with a more prophetic, relevant voice in a world that is very often confused, frustrated and disappointed with God.

Revisiting Gender Roles

Lily grew up in the Portuguese colony of Macau, a predominantly Chinese society with many Catholic schools. Lily spent 15 years growing up in the Catholic school life of Macau, but she never felt that she really belonged there. Her inner feeling of estrangement from the environment in which she spent more than half of her life to date had primarily to do with the Fathers and Sisters of the school's hermeneutical approach to teaching. Lily recalls:

That was an all girl Catholic school, so they were very careful about your behavior. You have to be the good girl, so they used the Bible to try to persuade you to behave or to conform to a certain role you have in society.¹⁸³

Lily offered me the example of the story of Jesus defending the alleged adulteress in John's gospel. Lily's background in sociology and her involvement with a more progressive theological group in Hong Kong after she left Catholic school contributed to her understanding Jesus as a social worker. The story from John 8:1-11 has become one of Lily's favorites in the Bible, because in it she finds Jesus the social worker defending a woman against the unjust violence of a patriarchal culture.

¹⁸³ Lily, interview.

In the all girl Catholic school, however, this story was taught as a warning to Lily and her peers that they must never be caught violating the gender roles laid out for them by society or they might end up like the woman in the story. Lilly elaborates:

You see, if you are a sex worker you will have very bad consequences. All people hate you, they look down on you. So [the Fathers and Sisters] use that example, that story, to say that you should behave well or no one will respect you. And the definition of “behave well” is being a girl or woman who does not touch anyone else, like any man or boy, unless this man is your husband. Otherwise, people will compare you with a sex worker.¹⁸⁴

Lily says that biblical interpretations and teachings like this were behind most of her negative experiences with the church.

Lily, however, would not accept such negativity with passive ease. She says, “When I was in high school I asked a lot of questions that made the Sisters very angry because I actually read the Bible.”¹⁸⁵ Lily’s questions represented the voices from the margins outside the Catholic school setting, and those questions served to push and expand the margins of gender roles prescribed by heteronormative society inside that setting. Goss elaborates, “Christ is not only outside the gates of the churches but also outside the boundaries of heterosexuality.”¹⁸⁶ Lily continues to read and cherish the teachings of the Bible, but the negative experiences from her past involvement with Catholic school and those interpretations of Jesus and the church keep her from becoming involved with a community of faith now.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Goss, 173.

In contrast with Lily's experience, Michelle now misses the active involvement in the church she enjoyed growing up. Michelle's gender identity makes her apprehensive about fully reengaging church life now. She identifies as female: "I would prefer to be female, but I was born male."¹⁸⁷ Michelle describes how she experienced amazing hospitality in a Unitarian Universalist church by being invited to join the women's group. Michelle admits that she does not pass easily as female when she dresses in women's clothing, and she wears men's clothes and goes by her birth name, Michael, in her usual daily life. Bearing this in mind, I asked Michelle how she would feel if someone in our congregation were to invite her to participate in the men's ministry of Friends Church. She said:

I would be hurt if I was asked to join or even attend a men's group, I definitely would. If I was dressed as Michelle, I would not be Michael; I would be Michelle. Girls like us transvestites-slash-transgendered feel as, and want to be treated as and perceived as, female, not male.¹⁸⁸

Michelle also informed me that when she dresses in men's clothing she is dressed in what is called "drab," a term that I had not heard before. Due to the fact that Michelle identifies as female, when she wears women's clothing she might appear to be cross dressing, or what is also referred to as dressing in drag; but Michelle feels that she is a female cross dressing as a man when she is forced to don the identity of Michael in her everyday life, thereby dressing in drab.

¹⁸⁷ Michelle/Michael, interview.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

As Lily learned in her Catholic school upbringing, Michelle discovers that her identity does not fit the mold of traditional gender roles often perceived as normal and thereby adhered to by the church; but normality must have abnormality in order to understand itself and to even exist, just like straightness needs queerness. The oneness we are baptized into in Christ Jesus, however, transcends such binary thinking.

Suddenly queerness is not so queer. DiNovo adds:

We are queer beings existing on a continuum of queer. The more we understand each other intimately, the more queer (different, unusual, abnormal) we seem to be. A church that allows us to be as queer as we feel, feels welcoming to queers (those that exist on the margins)... This is a church that cannot ever claim to “know” either scripture or Christ in the immediate sense and cannot claim to pass along anything but proximate witness to anyone. Church must humble itself to welcome the queerest of the queer.¹⁸⁹

Goss warns, “Fixed categories of sexuality and gender can be as violent as fixed christologies. Sexual and gender fluidity along with Christological fluidity, I believe, are the vital contours for constructing an inclusive Christology.”¹⁹⁰ Hearing these life experiences from Lily and Michelle were eye-opening for me, and they helped further inform my theology of Christ in whom the church as a body of diverse people is made one to the glory of God.

Lily identifies as queer, and Michelle as female. The church’s oppressive theology of a Christ who does not incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity into his prayer “that they may all be one” not only causes congregations to lose Lily’s

¹⁸⁹ DiNovo, 192.

¹⁹⁰ Goss, 174.

and Michelle's potential involvement, it causes congregations to lose Lily's and Michelle's offerings to an enriched theological conversation and consequent ecclesiological identity of inclusiveness. From the LGBTQ perspective, Ritley suggests:

I suspect that what people fear the most is the challenge we pose to the traditional gender roles, not our sexuality as such, because rethinking the gender roles might just require people to change and risk acknowledging the parts of themselves they have long rejected.¹⁹¹

Failing to incorporate Lily's and Michelle's sexuality and gender identity into the ecclesiological perspective results in the church never knowing the full potential of the body of Christ toward its mission of reconciling the brokenness of the world to our God of all-encompassing love. This is an extent of the self-inflicted body damage done by ecclesiological hospitality that excludes LGBTQ perspectives.

Let's Talk About Sex

Sixteen years ago, Paul's then partner died of AIDS. They had been together for 11 years when he died. Paul's partner was serving as a volunteer youth leader for a large church in an urban area when he was diagnosed as HIV positive. Discovering this startling news, Paul's partner went to talk with the church's pastor. Paul recalls:

The first words out of the pastor's mouth were, "You haven't molested any of the kids, have you?" [My partner] virtually never set foot in a church again

¹⁹¹ Countryman and Ritley, 68.

after that. So, that was obviously very negative for him, and it was for me, too. I still have a tough time driving by that church.¹⁹²

Stories like Paul's here cause the mind to wince and the heart to wretch with shock and shame. Paul continues:

I was so stunned by it, you know, even if..... even if a man is a pastor. That's such a complete lack of empathy and compassion. You would think that just common sense would keep you from saying that. But it didn't. That was a very negative experience.¹⁹³

The pastor's response to Paul's partner is sadly representative of the church's lack of empathy, compassion and even common sense in its perception of LGBTQ people.

Goss asserts:

Conservative scholars take pains to depict homosexual life as loathsome, depressing, lonely, and dangerous. These stereotypes are false caricatures, pointing to the failure of these scholars to engage queer communities of faith such as the MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). These scholars reflect the biases of their own church communities and their social practice of violence and exclusion of "practicing homosexuals."¹⁹⁴

While Goss' assessment bears truth, the church in Paul's story was "a pretty liberal church."¹⁹⁵ Regardless of how congregations are categorized by such labels, perceptions of LGBTQ people in all churches are largely founded on ecclesiology's failure to address matters of sex and sexuality, our failure to talk about sex.

By and large, matters of sex and sexuality in the church go hand in hand with politics at family gatherings: you do not talk about it; it is taboo. This is peculiar for

¹⁹² Paul, interview.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Goss, 186.

¹⁹⁵ Paul, interview.

the Christian faith that proclaims Jesus Christ as the ultimate embodiment of God's love for the whole of creation. "How ironic that the very religion that believes in the incarnation of God has consistently been negative to the human flesh."¹⁹⁶ This dismissal of body talk factors into the church's body damage.

Negating matters of sex and sexuality lead to what Goss terms "erotophobia," and it conflicts with the personhood of Jesus. Goss explains:

Jesus' sexuality certainly is a template for the healthy appropriation of sexuality by Christians. It forces us to deal with our own erotophobia, and we cannot recover from sexual shame and self-hatred when the primary template of Christian experience has been used to reinforce the notion of sexuality as sinful.¹⁹⁷

The self-loathing that results from ecclesiology's failure to talk about sex is tragically projected onto LGBTQ people, who are seen as primarily, if not exclusively, sexual beings. Kundtz and Schlager point out:

Our culture often applies grossly inaccurate stereotypes to [LGBTQ people]; in the eyes of the broader culture their primary identity is a sexual one. Some queer people are susceptible to this cultural assumption. Of course, it is no more true of LGBTQ people than it is of anyone else.¹⁹⁸

Goss adds:

The denial of human sexuality within spirituality is damaging to the human spirit because it alienates Christians from their own sexual selves and from their own bodies. This has led to impoverished theologies of sexuality and Christian violence against those who stray from married, heteronormative sexuality or procreation.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Goss, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹⁸ Kundtz & Schlager, 28.

¹⁹⁹ Goss, 113-114.

Surely, the pastor of the church where Paul's partner volunteered as a youth worker was a well-intentioned person, but good intentions are the mortar holding together the bricks of an oppressive theology that refuses to address matters of sex and sexuality. They are what tempt hetero ministers and laity alike to view LGBTQ people as potential sex offenders before seeing them as children of God with gifts to share and experiences to add to the life of the church. According to Kundtz and Schlager, this reveals an imperative for the ONA congregation:

We believe the churches are wrong not only in their homo-negativity, but more broadly, in their deep fear of all forms of human sexuality, which is expressed as an anti-sex stance in many ways. All people are suffering and many are dying because of these intransigent stances. Further, we believe that if one is unable or unwilling to reflect upon and revise in the light of faith those negative theological, psychological, and social biases toward LGBTQ people that we have all absorbed from our queer-phobic society, then one should not undertake any ministry to them.²⁰⁰

Paul's partner came to the pastor because he was devastated and needed pastoral care. How might the pastor's response have been different if it were informed by a theology that appreciated matters of sex and sexuality? What would church liturgies, Christian education, programs, and ministries look like if they were founded on a theology that talked about sex? How many more horror stories like Paul's about church responses to LGBTQ people in their times of desperation must we hear before we are willing to incorporate matters of the flesh into our ecclesiological discourse? And just how effective and far-reaching is the church's hospitality to the most

²⁰⁰ Kundtz & Schlager, 9.

vulnerable in society when sex and sexuality are swept under the ecclesiological doormat?

Patti has a friend in Texas A&M University's department of kinesiology who provides health education in many different communities, one of which is the black community. Patti's friend says that he has found allies among churches there in addressing HIV/AIDS, because some of their congregations have been forced to talk about sex. Patti shares:

In some of these individual congregations, they have to talk about it. This is the best place to get the word out about HIV/AIDS. My friend has met with a lot of those ministers and they've said, "This is a crisis and we have to deal with it," so they start talking about safe sex. That grass roots stuff is happening all the time. I think in some church communities that there's been a real sense of "we've messed up here and we need to fix this and talk about sex. We need to rethink the way we deal with sex." But it's had to come to a crisis for churches to kind of get there. The church missed the boat on that big time.²⁰¹

For these congregations that are "rethinking the way they deal with sex," their communities are blossoming into sources of education and awareness, healing, and reconciliation toward the most vulnerable: those who might not understand the insidiousness of HIV/AIDS, and those who have been abandoned by institutional authorities and powers who have sidestepped helping them in their times of anxiety and fear. These congregations' testimonies of courageous activism exemplify ecclesiological hospitality that emphasizes the lived experiences of people on the

²⁰¹ Patti, interview.

margins; people who might otherwise be dismissed by their surrounding community and society who view them as primarily sexual beings, modern day lepers.

Goss writes:

All the churches have perfected their rituals and social mechanisms for transmitting guilt about the body and sexuality: Sunday school, catechism classes, sermons, ritual clothes, and the encoded negative messages about sexuality communicated by families and religious specialists.²⁰²

It is no wonder, then, that when someone in our flock contracts a disease that can be transmitted sexually, their humanity and personhood are instantly stripped away and replaced with unhealthy projections; where they once were seen as human beings made in God's image, they suddenly become caricatures of sex offenders, the equivalent of modern day lepers, crafted by our own ignorant fears. Perhaps if the church where Paul's partner was volunteering had been willing to engage in discussions about sex and sexuality, the pastor and the congregation would not have jumped to thinking of sins of the flesh upon hearing his news of being diagnosed HIV positive. Instead, the congregation that talks about sex nurtures a healthier, more inclusive theology that understands all people as children of God bearing their own beautiful gifts, including the gifts of their sexuality.

For many translesbigay Christians, their churches have betrayed God's gift of sexuality and continue an erotophobic agenda of violence. Many queer Christians have moved out of their denominational churches as the only way to experience God's liberating grace.²⁰³

²⁰² Goss, 4.

²⁰³ Ibid., 33.

As Paul said in his interview, after the pastor asked his partner whether he had molested any of the kids who were in his care as a volunteer youth worker, Paul's partner never set foot in a church again. Although Paul continues to not only attend churches but also serve them devotedly through his gift of being an organist, he still has "a tough time" driving by the church that was hostile toward his partner. Is it homophobia that causes us in our churches to hold LGBTQ people at arm's length, or worse, to violently shut them out of the ecclesiological sphere; or is it all rooted in our failure to talk about sex by viewing matters of the flesh as abhorrent sins that will not be discussed in this house? To cross that needlessly forbidden line of educating one another in the church on matters of sex and sexuality would strip us of our temptation and even our ability to view our neighbor violently who does not resemble our own sexuality; and it would reveal to us again and again that we fleshly creatures have all been gifted with sexualities by our Creator that are meant to be nurtured and lived out healthily during our time on this earth to the glory of God. Talking about sex would also expand the free space of mutuality in the church, making us more hospitable to one another as children of God, and also reminding us continually that we LGBTQ and hetero people, in Maya Angelo's words, "are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike."²⁰⁴

In a church I once served on the ministerial staff, a laywoman in the congregation named Mary completed seminary and approached the deacon body with

²⁰⁴ Maya Angelou, excerpt from the poem "Human Family," found at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/285511>, accessed 14 February 2011.

a request to be ordained by the church. She had raised her two daughters in this church, who were in the youth group I served at that time. Mary was extremely gifted, intelligent, and devoted to her life of faith and all matters of ecclesiological integrity. However, Mary was gay (her partner, Betty, was also an active member of the church and had been for many years at that point). Mary's sexual orientation caused the congregation to face the question candidly, "Are we willing to ordain a homosexual?" What resulted were "town hall" meetings, where the congregation would ask Mary questions that are typically posed to a candidate for ordination; but in that particular church, the questions are usually directed from an ordination council of eight to ten people, not the entire congregation. Moreover, the questions are not typically posed in such a way as to reveal the strangeness of the ordinand. Mary was placed in a situation where a hostile community was trying to expose her as being unfit to be ordained so as to dodge the bullet of answering the question they originally posed to themselves, "Are we willing to ordain a homosexual?" Ironically, however, if they were to find something in those town hall meetings that proved Mary to be unfit for ordination, it would be viewed in the congregation's mind as her being unfit on account of her sexual orientation; that ultimately is what set her apart from everyone else.

Talking about sex tends to remove the shroud of our own fears, thereby revealing a powerless little voice begging that we pay no attention to the man behind the curtain and to go on viewing LGBTQ people with hostile otherness. At one of the town hall meetings, someone raised their hand to ask Mary a question. She asked,

“Mary, what would you say if a teenager in the church approached you because he or she was thinking about having sex? How would you respond to that young person?”

Mary had a warm smile on her face that seemed to say, “Why do you even have to ask that question?” and she responded, “Well, I’d tell them that they are too young to be having sex, that they need to be educated about it and know more about it before they go thinking that they can do it.” She elaborated eloquently from that point, but the congregation who hoped to confirm their own misinformed suspicions had to grimace at the lesbian who did not respond, “Oh, I don’t know, because gay people like myself shouldn’t be in positions of talking to teenagers about sex. Maybe I’d refer that young person to a hetero male, because they have more authority to discuss such matters.”

Talking about sex truly does reveal that we are more alike than we are unlike, and in our likeness is the mutual need to be recognized for who we are, to be heard, and to be loved. As Kundtz and Schlager conclude, “LGBTQ people are the way we are because we are the way we are, the same as everyone else is the way they are.”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Kundtz and Schlager, 7.

The Higher Standard of Hospitality: Embracing Ecclesiological Queerness

Last summer a dear friend and colleague of mine attended the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. The hot topic was a vote on whether to ordain gay and lesbian people. During the debate, my friend posted the following statement on Facebook: “My summary of the current debate at GA: Fear of institutional death vs. Following Jesus to join with the stranger in our midst. Time to listen to Jesus.” In the church, our life of discipleship takes us deep into contexts and situations where we are invited to join with the LGBTQ people in our midst. Acceptance of that invitation empowers us to achieve a higher standard of ecclesiological hospitality.

Paul concluded his interview by saying:

While the church is a community organization, it should be held to a higher standard. In my opinion, if the church doesn't have hospitality, they don't have the fundamental ingredient that differentiates them from being any other organization.

Ecclesiological hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives would certainly be a standard over and above what is required of institutional power structures that exclude and oppress those who are considered queer. To reach this standard, however, will require a great deal of reparative work on the part of the church that has inflicted so much hostility toward LGBTQ people, and that has, as a consequence, inflicted so much ecclesiological body damage to itself in the process.

Reaching the higher standard of hospitality will demand that the church get over itself and remove the self-inflicted damage that keeps us from accepting ourselves as who we are by the grace of God. I term this “ecclesiological self-acceptance.” If we listen to Jesus, we hear instructions to love our neighbors as we love ourselves; and in this respect, self-loathing is the greatest obstacle to authentic hospitality. Sutherland contends:

We should see others (neighbors, enemies, and strangers) in such a way that they are visible to us not as a mere object but as a reflection of our own fallen and redeemed humanity. Seeing is inhuman if it is not the seeing of another human.²⁰⁶

Ecclesiological self-acceptance requires Nouwen’s movement from hostility to hospitality. A congregation cannot accept itself as it is—ceaselessly, boundlessly loved by God, and capable of accomplishing all things through the strength of Christ—until it stops pointing its finger of hostile judgment at others and starts offering free space to all people into which strangers can enter and speak from their own perspective that is uniquely valued and loved by God. Paul shares in his interview:

Paul: I do pretty strongly believe that although we can find lots of faults with the church, just like with any other organization, it truly is because it’s us; it’s made of humans. The church is going to have its flaws. And I don’t mind that it has its flaws, I expect that. It’s just that some of the church’s biggest flaws are the things that it preaches against the most. And so, it’s kind of like a Freudian defense mechanism.

²⁰⁶ Sutherland, 37.

Dan: So, the church, as an organic structure, is self-loathing to a certain extent.

Paul: I think so. I'm a therapist, although I'm not practicing now. But when I do therapy with people, it's with the folks that insist the most strongly that their families are wonderful. That's a direct correlation with how sick the families are. I think you see the same thing with church.²⁰⁷

Nouwen writes, "Sometimes it seems that gossip, condemnation of other people's behavior and outright attacks against their life choices are more a sign of our own self-doubt than of our solidly grounded convictions."²⁰⁸ In the context of hostility toward LGBTQ people, the more the church adheres to an oppressive theology that preaches and teaches antagonism toward the queer community, the more the church will lose its own grounding in the gospel of Jesus Christ and blur its mission of transforming the world to be more like the realm of God.

A history of hostility toward LGBTQ people has caused the church to lose opportunities at being in community with such extraordinary people as the ones I was fortunate enough to interview, and it has resulted in the church's own self-loathing due to a lack of perspective that reveals the abundance of the love of God. To disallow matters of sex and sexuality from building up unwarranted barriers between our congregations and LGBTQ people girds powerful, refreshing hospitality that strives to make us all one in Christ Jesus. In her book, *Sex and the Church*, Kathy Rudy claims:

²⁰⁷ Paul, interview.

²⁰⁸ Nouwen, 18.

The command to be hospitable can be seen as a part of the great commission to tell the world the good news of Jesus Christ. Our task in reconstructing a progressive sexual ethic is not to deny or sidestep power, but rather to invite others into the power of God, to welcome them into the radically transformative power which realigns the world, to see each other as Christians rather than as men or women, gay or straight, rich or poor. The new standard of hospitality advocates a union with all needing persons and thus returns new life to the community. With hospitality, we have no way of condemning homosexuality because the very notion of same or different sex would fall away in favor of our common identification of Christian.²⁰⁹

Not allowing sexuality to keep us from seeking the same God as the most marginalized in society seek is not abnormal; rather, it is queer, because it is in line with the Gospel imperative that we “may all be one.”

Althaus-Reid writes:

Queer is a word which originally meant ‘transverse’ or ‘oblique’ and it is used in a positive way. Queer theory celebrates diversity, the crossing of borders and imprecise frontiers. It liberates the assumed reference of theology and therefore liberates Godself from assumptions and ideological justifications.²¹⁰

The queer experience, then, is not exclusively associated with LGBTQ people when it is held up to the message of Jesus’ ministry of reaching out to the margins of society and there activating the love of God:

The queer experience, the experience of being on the edge of acceptability if not wholly unacceptable, could even be extended to the apparently most typical church member, a white, straight, married, psychiatrically normal male.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 102.

²¹⁰ Althaus-Reid, 143.

²¹¹ DiNovo, 129.

An ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, therefore, brings blessed queerness to the entire body of Christ. As a fellow minister and dear friend of mine who is gay once told me, “You don’t have to be gay to be queer.”

The higher standard of hospitality places the bar above our humanly crafted binary divisions. Breaking down those barriers demands that the church let go of all hostility and embrace its own ecclesiological queerness. This is the attitude adjustment that James alluded to in his interview; and it is the church’s repentance and new direction that enables us to find queerness in the very identity of God. Seeing God as queer floods the human heart with newfound ability to see one’s neighbor as an equal, as bearing gifts from the Divine, and as beautifully made in our Creator’s image, regardless of race, age, ability, gender identity or sexual orientation:

The Queer God is present in every group or individual who still dares to believe that God is fully present among the marginalized, exceeding the narrow confines of sexual and political ideologies. For God comes out from heterosexual theology when the voices from sexual dissidents speak out to the churches, daring to unveil sexual ideologies from theology, and daring to love with integrity in a world where love has also become a commodity. In fact, in every community of excluded people and in every inch of the struggle for sexual and economic justice, the Queer God manifests Godself with full glory, power and grace.²¹²

If the church hopes to practice hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ people’s perspectives, we will have to recognize our shared queerness. This is the imperative of the inclusive theology declaring that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but that we are all one in Christ Jesus. The spiritual hospitality

²¹² Althaus-Reid, 176.

that expands space to accommodate all people translates into ecclesiology by proclaiming that the ONA congregation is a community of queer people. When the church recognizes this revelation, our communal identity does not look like the world around us.

Freddy James Clark writes, “The purpose of the church is to reveal an alternative way of perceiving and living life in the world,” and Jesus instructs us to be in the world but not of it.²¹³ As my friend’s Facebook post asserted, it’s time to listen to Jesus. Our world thinks in terms of normal and abnormal, but in the church where we proclaim the equality and unique value of every individual, regardless of who we are or where we come from, we refuse to accept that we are abnormal; rather, that we are God’s alternative from the hostility of a broken world. We are new creations in Christ Jesus. Our identity in Christ transcends any and all barriers that once divided us, including gender identity and sexual orientation. In our newness, we are all one, and we are all queer.

In order to practice authentic hospitality, then, the church must apply the queer perspective to the Scriptures, its stories, messages, and teachings in which the church community’s identity is primarily grounded. We explore this queering of Scripture in the following chapter. As Joan says, “Let’s be authentic and see where it takes us!”²¹⁴

²¹³ Clark, 64.

²¹⁴ Joan, interview.

CHAPTER FIVE:
ECCLESIOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY AND THE WORD OF GOD

“The Wind Will Show Its Kindness,” by Meister Eckhart

*A man
born blind can easily
deny the magnificence of a vast landscape.*

*He can easily deny all the wonders that he cannot touch,
smell, taste, or hear.*

*But one day the wind will show you its kindness
and remove the tiny patches that
covered our eyes,*

*and we will see God more clearly
than we have ever seen
ourselves.²¹⁵*

**Addressing the Whale in the Middle of the Room: A Queer Approach to
Scripture**

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Jonah offers timeless lessons on a multitude of topics constantly jabbing at the human condition: the folly of our preconceived notions and judgments against our fellow humanity, mustering the willpower to rise to unwanted challenges, grappling with what might be perceived as the sadistic nature

²¹⁵ Meister Eckhart, “The Wind Will Show Its Kindness,” ed. Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2002), 93.

of God, and so forth. Jonah is a rich story about a man with adamant principles forced out of his comfort zone and into the turbulent unknown. He travels begrudgingly to Nineveh by way of being thrown from a boat bound for Tarshish, being swallowed by a great fish and then vomited onto dry land. His interaction with sailors out of Joppa, his desperate prayer from the belly of a fish, his encounters with a nation of supposedly wicked people, and his dialogue with God all intersect with our life experiences in convicting, inspiring, and hope-filled ways. There is so much to be found in the pages of Jonah, but when I think of that awe-inspiring book, what immediately comes to mind is that Jonah was swallowed by a whale because he refused to obey God. That message, that image, that interpretation trumps everything else, and what a shame.

Why is it that such a powerful story goes largely unappreciated? Why do the few verses in Jonah that account for a great fish swallowing God's wayward messenger overshadow all the others? By and large, that is how the story has been told, and that is the main message, if not the only message, that is taken from Jonah as a result. The ONA congregation, however, has the gift of a queer lens through which to revisit this text, if it would only seize that gift. In her essay, "A Queer Reading of the Book of Jonah," Sharon Bezner writes:

The traditional meaning and interpretation of the book of Jonah is one that has been established by the prominent theologians of the last two hundred years: white heterosexual middle-class Anglo-Saxon men. One can only wonder how the text would be interpreted by other groups of people, people whose life experiences are nonwhite, nonheterosexual, non-middle class, non-Anglo-Saxon, and non-men. What would it look like for

gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (queer) people to read and interpret the book of Jonah?²¹⁶

Bezner's question goes unanswered when the ONA congregation refuses to revisit these texts through a queer reading. By affirming LGBTQ perspectives, this becomes an act of ecclesiological hospitality.

What does it mean to read Scripture through a queer lens, or to engage in a queer reading of the Bible? Would not someone need to identify as LGBTQ in order to be a queer reader? Remember that in the ONA congregation, we are a Christ-centered, gospel-rooted community. This ecclesiological identity requires that we show hospitality to one another that affirms the entirety of our being, listening to and incorporating LGBTQ perspectives into our shared life of faith. Affirming our LGBTQ siblings, therefore, brings mutual queerness to our ONA congregation.

Inherent in this communal identity of queerness is the power to revisit and reclaim the texts that have so often been used to oppress and exclude anyone from full participation in the ministry of the church who is nonwhite, nonheterosexual, non-middle class, non-Anglo-Saxon, and non-men. Regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, the queer reader actively searches for those messages, narratives and voices that have been silenced and excluded by a narrow interpretation of the Bible. In the case of Jonah, the ONA congregation is called to take up a queer reading of the text and address the whale in the middle of the room that has

²¹⁶ Sharon Bezner, "A Queer Reading of the Book of Jonah," eds., Goss, Robert E. and Mona West, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 162.

swallowed the fullness of the story and consequently robbed LGBTQ people of their God-given connection to that message.

What keeps the ONA congregation from engaging in a queer reading of scripture? When it comes to the lived experience of LGBTQ people, the Bible has been used against them as a weapon far more than it has been shared as a message of God's love. In his interview, Carlos said that one thing the church does poorly is how it treats Scripture: "The worst part of it is the abuse of the Bible. I think it is as simple as that; just the abuse of it."²¹⁷ A handful of texts that have been hurled at LGBTQ people (Gen. 19:1-28; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) is often called "clobber passages," because they are used to promote homophobia and violence against them.²¹⁸ In borrowing Phyllis Trible's term, Robert Goss has identified them as the queer community's "texts of terror."²¹⁹ When there is a lived experience among LGBTQ people that ranges from feelings of fear and self-loathing to anger and resentment, the ONA congregation that affirms LGBTQ people's perspectives has a shared apprehension in engaging the entirety of the Bible.

I offer this example: Recently, our congregation hosted a series of events on the topic of immigration reform to gather people in our community who are eager to advocate for undocumented immigrants in our midst. As it has been used in the past

²¹⁷ Carlos, interview.

²¹⁸ Robert E. Goss & West, Mona, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 3.

²¹⁹ Robert E. Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 90-94, cited in Goss & West, 3.

to justify slavery and the abuse of women (for which the Bible is still being used), the Bible is now often used in our area of the country to justify racism and territorialism. In an effort to counter that usage of the Bible and to promote the immigration reform events, our church's Social Justice Class placed a message on our marquee that read, "Treat the foreigner as a native. –Leviticus 19:33."²²⁰ The placement of the Bible citation on the sign was intentional. The class felt that without it, the message would not offer as much potency or draw as much attention to what was being suggested about how we handle immigration reform. However, when one of our lesbian church members drove into the parking lot later that day for a committee meeting, her reaction to the marquee message was not what the Social Justice Class had in mind.

Seeing the word 'Leviticus' on the marquee gave this church member a chilling reaction that felt to her like a symptom of PTSD. The clobber passage of Leviticus 18:22 flashed in her mind when she saw the word 'Leviticus.' Suddenly her own church, where she felt safe being out and comfortable in who she was, was now displaying hostile messages toward her that made her feel unwelcome. When she raised this in the committee meeting, it was made apparent that she was not alone in feeling this way. The 'Leviticus 19:33' portion of the marquee's wording came down promptly. When the Social Justice Class got word of this, however, representatives from the class reached out to this church member offering their reasoning for

²²⁰ This translation of Leviticus 19:33 is derived from Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible, *The Message*. In the NRSV translation, Leviticus 19:33 reads, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien."

including the Bible reference on the sign. After that, 'Leviticus 19:33' was placed back on the marquee, but a feeling of unease remained.

The tension from this situation is an indicator of our ONA congregation's apprehension about addressing the whale in the middle of the room. Tragically, for the distressed congregant who encountered a hostile message on her own church's marquee, the clobber passage of Leviticus 18:22 is the androcentric whale that has swallowed the entire book of Leviticus for her. Leviticus in its entirety is perceived as a damning tirade against LGBTQ people because the patriarchal, hyper-masculine whale of unchallenged hermeneutics has devoured the fullness of its message. The name Leviticus is one that is not to be uttered in the ONA congregation's house; but just as surely as Jonah is a broad story that offers much more than a tale of a great fish swallowing God's dissident, the inspiration and revelation that Leviticus has to offer are extinguished when the wrongfully oppressive translation of one verse is heralded as the book's summarizing headline.

To ease the tension and, more pointedly, to offer a healing balm on the wounds inflicted by centuries of the Bible's manipulation against LGBTQ people, it is time for the ONA church to address the whale in the middle of the room. The first step in this process requires that we courageously set aside apprehension and fear about reengaging texts that have gone too long with only one interpretation. In a collection of essays contributed by queer readers called *Take Back the Word*, editors Robert Goss and Mona West write:

We believe the point of reference for a queer reading of scripture is the notion that the Bible is our friend. When we approach the Bible as a friendly text, as a text that ‘does no harm,’ the terror of the Scriptures is transformed into the life-giving Word of God.²²¹

To move from the Bible being viewed as a weapon and toward it being understood as our friend is that spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality; free space is culminated around biblical interpretation wherein LGBTQ experiences illuminate the areas of God’s Word that were previously swallowed up.

Joan has not allowed one interpretation of Noah’s story in the Book of Genesis to overshadow messages that converge with her queer experience. In the interview, when I asked Joan if she had any favorite stories in the Bible, she said, “Noah’s Ark,” but her interpretation of that story and its importance is the gift of a queer reading:

Joan: My favorite part of that whole story is what happens after the flood; the part that’s not on your felt boards, where he gets drunk and passes out in his tent. Here he is: Godliest man. He’s obedient to God in His absolute, ridiculous request, yet he’s still flawed and it’s okay. I like it. It’s just interesting to me that that’s the part of the story that never gets told. It makes you wonder why you wouldn’t tell that part. Isn’t that equally significant to the great act of obedience? It’s great to be obedient, that’s good; but to be flawed and for God to know that all this stuff is going to happen? “He’s going to go crazy after the ark lands. He’s going to go on a bender.” God saw all that beforehand, and instead of saying, “Ah, screw it! I don’t need this guy, he going to screw up anyway,” God didn’t. I like it. It’s a good story.

Dan: So, why does this trigger emotion for you? Why has this stuck with you as your favorite?

²²¹ Goss and West, 5.

Joan: Well, I used to be a youth minister in the Baptist church and obviously gay. I wasn't out at the time, but I mean come on, if you're gay you're gay. I wasn't dating; I wasn't doing any of that stuff. I was very respectful of the rules and all that, but when I decided that I wanted to start dating someone, there's that very real moment when you go, "Okay, this person isn't going to be welcomed in my church. I'm not going to be welcome in my church." So, it resonates with me because it's what the Baptist church would call, or at least this specific Baptist church that I went to would call, my great act of disobedience, which I would call living an authentic life. It doesn't negate everything else, which I think that a lot of people would say that it does. So, while I don't go on benders all the time, I get Noah, you know? I get it.²²²

By being able to revisit and reclaim the story of Noah for herself based on her lived experience, Joan embraces the Bible as a friend that does no harm. She gets it, and that clarity empowers her to have no fear in being her authentic self. Goss elaborates:

Queer critical readings of the scriptures transform texts into narratives of resistance, whereby queer Christians can hear the resonances of their voices and lives within the text...My "queerness" is a priori before my reading a biblical text, and it is the horizon or social location from which I enter into the text, queer it, and bring it into my own queer world of meaning and empowered Christian practice.²²³

The spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality in how the ONA congregation reads the Bible has a direct correlation with ecclesiological hospitality. A queer reading of Scripture asks, "Who is being denigrated in this text? Who benefits from their being denigrated? Are there persons being left out? Who are they?" Hearing queer interpretations of Scripture like Joan's compels the ONA congregation to ask questions of its own hospitality toward LGBTQ people: "Is our

²²² Joan, interview.

²²³ Goss, 215.

hospitality authoritarian? Are we exhibiting control over those to whom we open our doors? In our preparations to receive others, is anyone being left out? Who are they?" DiNovo suggests:

The church needs to be called back to faithfulness, a faithfulness to its own scripture from which it has strayed at the behest of modernism and of the world's powers. Perhaps in this century the church is the object of an evangelization process initiated by God and carried out by the queer.²²⁴

Essentially, if the ONA church is unwilling to revisit the sacred texts in which it is grounded with an emphatic incorporation of LGBTQ perspectives, hospitality toward LGBTQ people is only half-hearted. Inaction on the part of the congregation in this respect does disservice to its own efforts at hospitality, as well as its desire to seek the fullness of God's Word in the pages of the Bible.

In her queer reading of the Book of Jonah, Bezner comes away with questions based on revisiting the experience of Jonah himself. This character is typically portrayed as someone whose only flaw is a lapse in judgment when he disobeys God, and he supposedly makes up for it by doing what God asks despite the wickedness of those nasty Ninevites. However, does not the fact that God sent Jonah to save Nineveh reveal the expansiveness of God's care and the radical measures God will take to let the Ninevites know how much they are loved? Jonah looked upon Nineveh with disdain before and after he carried out his mission to them, and he even despises Nineveh at the close of the story. Perhaps this man of God was more flawed than we

²²⁴ DiNovo, 102.

thought, and perhaps we harbor some of those same flaws in our efforts at ecclesiological hospitality.

Viewing Nineveh as the queer community and Jonah as the religious oppressor that dismisses them based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, Bezner raises new questions for the church:

Who are we to decide whom God loves? If we are angry about how God extends God's love, and to whom, are we not making ourselves God? Isn't that the meaning of idolatry in today's society, and not the worship of statues or golden calves? And if that is the case, are not our thoughts, our beliefs, our theology, that got us to this place, in error? If so, are we not then called to examine ourselves, to do some introspective soul searching, to hear God's truth in our hearts, and to make our hearts and actions in sync with God?²²⁵

A queer reading of Scripture shows hospitality by incorporating LGBTQ people's lived experience into revitalized interpretations of our sacred texts. DiNovo asserts, "Queer theology has been developing so as to proclaim scripture as pro-queer. It is perhaps time for progressives, to look to scripture for a defense of queerness, which it most certainly seems to be."²²⁶ This communal act of addressing the whale in the middle of the room empowers the ONA congregation with a friendly embrace of Scripture that will not stand for any of our congregants being made to feel discomfort or fear of any kind when encountering the Bible. Invigorated with new revelations of God's love and the variant experiences found throughout the scriptures, the ONA congregation is more adequately prepared to offer hospitality toward LGBTQ people

²²⁵ Bezner, 169.

²²⁶ DiNovo, 101.

who would come to reclaim their undeniable place in the pages of Scripture and the life of the church.

Queer Hermeneutics: A Question of Scriptural Authority

Does queer biblical criticism illuminate the authority of Scripture in the same way that an evangelical or fundamentalist interpretation would? Not necessarily. A queer reading of the Bible disrupts and exposes the false pretenses of authority itself. Just as history is written by the powerful victors in a particular setting and time, the pages of the Bible are written by men who would benefit from the message they penned. Our ecclesiological doctrine proclaims that the authors of Scripture were divinely inspired; yes, but also humanly flawed by and limited to their own perspectives. Queer biblical criticism does not question so much the authority of the Bible itself; rather, queer reading prods the so-called authority of modern hermeneutics that do not take into consideration, let alone question, the androcentric, hyper-masculine vantage point of Scripture's original authors. In his book, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, Edward Farley remarks:

The Christian community typically has assumed that if the interpretation of authoritative texts is done properly, all other interpretations will take care of themselves. It is just at this point that the believer (and the community of believers) falls into uncritical and even idolatrous paradigms of the use of texts.²²⁷

²²⁷ Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 37.

Queer biblical criticism serves to liberate Scripture from hermeneutics that would sell the Word of God short, holding the Bible at the level of idolatry.

The authority of Scripture is appreciated in varying capacities and degrees across time and denominational lines. Within the United Church of Christ, for example, the Bible is understood as inspiring and powerful but not as the final authority on all matters of ecclesiology, polity and theology. “The Bible is God's gift to the church, to be read for our instruction and comfort.”²²⁸ Understood in this manner, Scripture is only authoritative to the extent that it is life-giving and empowering. As James remarked in his interview:

The big message of scripture that I keep coming back to is Christ's words when he says, “The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind,” and that the second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself. So, for me, Scripture should always tie back to those two things. When I think of the Bible, when I think of Scripture, I think first and foremost of the word ‘love,’ and everything ties back to that. So now, whenever I hear a doctrine or an interpretation, I always check it against this concept of love and whether it fits with that; how scripture describes and demonstrates love.²²⁹

I would argue, however, that queer biblical criticism disrupts the very word ‘authority.’ Within the context of ecclesiological doctrine, the word ‘authority’ bears heterosexual undertones. Goss remarks:

²²⁸ Accessed from <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/theology/dunkirk-colloquy-2000.html>, 28 March 2011.

²²⁹ James, interview.

Ecclesial authority...can use Jesus the Christ or biblical doctrines to bless homophobic practices, discrimination, or governmental policies. It often legitimizes homophobia and homophobic social practices.²³⁰

The authority of Scripture in this respect is the patriarchal mandate that cannot be altered or else the church's heteronormative authority might unravel into myriad perspectives that challenge that status quo. Queer biblical criticism invokes such a power shift and ushers in vital, new messages heretofore lost in the confines of limited hermeneutics. Clark writes:

The Bible which houses stories of oppression and other forms of injustice, tells us how God acted on behalf of the oppressed creating opportunities for covenant along the way, and then becomes the voice for all who are oppressed. It is a theology from the other side, where biblical remembrance is coupled with historical experience, and alternatives develop for combating injustice. This method depends upon the oppressed knowing the biblical narrative, seeing how the narrative speaks to their historical experiences, and finding a way for this story to be told. In telling the story, new hopes emerge and old fears dissipate. The story that is told is that God is on the side of the oppressed for the sake of human community.²³¹

These are the dynamics of queer reading, but the "new hopes that emerge" are not limited to one authoritative interpretation.

In the aforementioned example of one queer reading of Jonah, the story is reinterpreted as having to do with hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives. By contrast, consider an alternative queer interpretation of the text from another LGBTQ experience: A gay woman, Tina, at odds with her own sexuality, struggles with the thought that God desires for her authentic self to come out. Taking a page

²³⁰ Goss, 142.

²³¹ Clark, 68.

from Jonah's experience, Tina runs away from God and into the closet. She withholds her lesbian self from the public eye as Jonah withholds his true agenda for boarding the men's boat at Tarshish, in effect concealing his true identity. Tina's closeted existence leads to self-loathing. Unable to endure the weight of this experience, she faces the possibility that God is urging her to come out in like manner with Jonah's giving up his evasiveness, allowing himself to be thrown overboard, and then being swallowed into the belly of the great fish. With nowhere else to go and with no other options left but to face God and struggle with God's desires for her, Tina eventually embraces her authentic self and decides to live openly as a lesbian. She reads Jonah and likens her experience with God's wayward prophet, who, after struggling with God from the belly of a fish, is released into a bold, new existence. Additionally, Jonah's experience thereafter continues to resonate with Tina who now views her loving hetero parents' passive aggressive remarks against LGBTQ people with the same resentment that Jonah views the people of Nineveh whom he has been commissioned to save by way of shedding new light on their ignorance. According to principles of queer biblical criticism, neither Tina's understanding of Jonah nor the reading that yields a message about hospitality boast exclusive ownership of Scripture's authority in their respective interpretations. Queer biblical criticism proclaims that the authority of Scripture is revealed when the comfortable are afflicted and the afflicted are comforted. Furthermore, queer readings are no longer queer when they herald the infallible authority of one hermeneutical interpretation of Scripture over another. Regardless, Kundtz and Schlager point out:

No matter what one concludes that the Bible or other sacred texts say or do not say about LGBTQ people, we are still here. We are in your congregations, a part of your communities, with needs, sufferings, gifts, and blessings, the same as everyone else.²³²

An Explanation of Queer Reading and Choosing Joshua 2

We have been introduced to the benefits of a queer reading of Scripture, or what Goss refers to as queering the Bible, and how that applies to the ONA congregation posturing itself for ecclesiological hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives.²³³ What I offer here is a simple exercise in reading the story of Rahab and the two spies accounted in Joshua 2 through a queer lens. This approach is based on Marcella Althaus-Reid's concept of indecent theology. Texts are handled in a manner that is viewed as indecent by the interpretive powers that cage the Bible in an androcentric, patriarchal framework which shuns any mention of sex or sexuality. In a presentation delivered at the Academy of Religious Leadership Annual Meeting in Chicago in April of 2009, Steve Sprinkle, the Director of Field Education and Supervised Ministry at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School, elaborates on what Althaus-Reid's queer reading of Joshua would entail for the reader:

What if, as Althaus-Reid suggests, we were to read this biblical story indecently as if it were passed along by rumor in a gay bar? Or better yet, what if a Hetero-Pope or Televangelist showed up undercover in this same bar full of gay men in order to commune with a different reality than his own, and listened in as these queer folk retold this story in their own voices? How

²³² Kundtz and Schlager, 3.

²³³ Goss, 215.

would hermeneutic centers and margins look through the lenses of these strangers alienated from the patriarchal God who have a particularly strong investment in how queer sexual theology is done in dialogue with the [story of Rahab and the two spies]?²³⁴

These questions exemplify the queer reading approach that Althaus-Reid outlines in two phases.²³⁵ First, the reader applies basic deconstructionist steps to the text. These steps work to uncover textual elements that oppose characteristics of heterosexist thought, “for example, features of the story that resist or subvert dyadic, patriarchal structure.”²³⁶ Relationships among the elements in the story are then “inverted, dispersed and disrupted,” in order to loosen heterosexist ownership of the text bolstered by binary organization: “slaves make the master; women make men; women make God the Father; Queers make straights; sinners make ‘the saved.’”²³⁷ This enables the reader to revisit the text and find how the differences that justify otherness are established.

The second phase requires further queering of the text for the sake of the “other” that is discovered from the deconstructionist steps. Sprinkle elaborates, “Since assimilationist tendencies in biblical interpretation are so strong, continual queering needs to be done so that the concreteness of the Other may resist being

²³⁴ Steve V. Sprinkle, “A God at the Margins?: Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Marginality of LGBT People,” presented at the Academy of Religious Leadership Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, 18 April 2009, 7.

²³⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2003), 80-85.

²³⁶ Sprinkle, 7.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, citing Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 80.

absorbed by a re-reading that leaves queer folk outside the stories.”²³⁸ Further queering of the text advocates for the marginalized “other,” not allowing them to be subjugated to a heterosexist interpretation of Scripture; instead the “other” is liberated into the full authenticity of their likeness and relationship with God. In this exercise, I utilize further queering of the reading to connect LGBTQ experiences with that of Rahab.

For this queer reading, I selected Joshua 2 for a few reasons. First, the story of Rahab and the two spies is a queer story from the outset: a marginalized woman living a life of supposed solitude on the outskirts of the city assists two men who, by nature of being nationalistic enemies, are twice as oppressive toward Rahab as the male-driven society of her Canaanite roots. It is a story about the hidden hiding the enemy. Second, this story does not appear in the Common Lectionary of Scriptures. Studying this text through a queer lens, I hope to preach about our sister, Rahab, in the future. Finally, it is a story about hospitality. How might revisiting the account of an alleged prostitute providing safety to her would be conquerors in their time of desperate need inform an ecclesiology of hospitality that seeks to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives?

²³⁸ Sprinkle, 7.

Recognizing Holiness: A Queer Reading of Joshua 2

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, 'Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.' Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.' But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, 'True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.' She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut. Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.' Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. She said to them, 'Go towards the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterwards you may go on your way.' The men said to her, 'We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. If any of you

go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you.’ She said, ‘According to your words, so be it.’ She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window. They departed and went into the hill country and stayed there for three days, until the pursuers returned. The pursuers had searched all along the way and found nothing. Then the two men came down again from the hill country. They crossed over, came to Joshua son of Nun, and told him all that had happened to them. They said to Joshua, ‘Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands; moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us.’²³⁹

Deconstructing Joshua, we discover that the Israelites are insiders and the Canaanites are outsiders. This is based on an understanding of nationalistic conquest where Jericho must fall in order for God’s people to be victorious and have only their fidelity with Yahweh to grapple with in the future, as opposed to any armies of men. The maleness of the armies is significant in this text, as well, because while all Canaanites—warriors and civilians—were viewed as outsiders to be obliterated, only Israelite men were considered insiders.²⁴⁰ The story of Joshua is told by men, for men, and to the detriment of any “other” perspective:

Histories are told whether consciously or unconsciously, from particular perspectives with particular political agendas. The primary perspective of Joshua is clear: Yahweh has chosen men to bring this nation into being.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Joshua 2, *NRSV*.

²⁴⁰ Danna Nolan Fewell, “Joshua,” in *Women’s Biblical Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 70.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

It appears, at first glance, that Rahab holds this otherness in common with her fellow Canaanites. From the purview of Israelite men, all Canaanites are one in their otherness and equally despised as outsiders by their assailants. Perhaps this is where Rahab establishes an identity; but even within her nationality, she has no identity whatsoever. The Canaanites are an androcentric society, and Rahab is a woman who lives alone with no family to speak of, let alone any husband or father. Biblical commentator, Danna Fewell, points out, “Women, children, and servants are thought to be extensions of the father rather than independent individuals... The Father speaks for all.” With no father or husband, Rahab is an extension from nothing. Men in her time and context are identified, and women are not, making Rahab unidentifiable, unrecognized, and unheard. So, from the purview of Israelite men, she is other than the other.

Finally, Rahab is also a prostitute who lives in a house built over the gap between the two walls bordering Jericho. “As a prostitute she is marginal even in her own culture, and her marginality is symbolized by her dwelling in the city wall, in the very boundary between the inside and the outside.”²⁴² All of these binaries epitomize Rahab as an outsider from Israel’s perspective, which is the authoritative vantage point from which this text is normatively interpreted. Rahab the outsider Canaanite makes the Israelite army of insiders. Rahab the unidentified woman makes the

²⁴² Ibid., 72.

authoritatively identified Canaanite man. Rahab the harlot makes the honorable, morally upright spies.

Later in the Book of Joshua, however, Joshua encounters someone whose affiliation with holiness dissolves the binaries of insiders and outsiders. Joshua 5:13-15, *NRSV*:

Once when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?’ He replied, ‘Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.’ And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and he said to him, ‘What do you command your servant, my lord?’ The commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.’ And Joshua did so.

The man who appears to Joshua is not an either/or messenger from God. He is not affiliated with Israel or with Canaan. He is not able to be categorized as an insider or an outsider based on nationality. His representation is of holiness itself.

Joshua, being the leader of Israel’s army, is the champion of the heteronormative lens through which the entire Book of Joshua is widely accepted. When Joshua falls at the feet of the man in this passage and proceeds to worship, the androcentric, hyper-masculine, patriarchal purview falls down with him. Fewell remarks, “It is the recognition of holiness, not one’s nationality, suggests this story, that identifies one with God’s people,” and the man towering over the binary interpretation of Joshua demands that holiness be recognized.²⁴³ When the reader is liberated from having to recognize insiders and outsiders in order to understand the

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 69.

story, it is possible to revisit Rahab through the queer lens that seeks to recognize the holiness in her experience.

Rahab lives alone and makes her own living. Given that her culture views women, children and servants as extensions from the father, Rahab's household and vocation provide her with her own identity, a queer identity. This method of subverting from her heteronormative culture is synonymous with the subversive actions taken by LGBTQ people living in the midst of an often hostile culture of heterosexism.

Rahab's home life is indeed a queer one, but that does not stop the two Israelite spies from darkening her door. Read as part of a heterosexist narrative, the fact that the spies from upstanding Israel are at the door of a prostitute's home is not so much pardoned as sidestepped altogether. One biblical commentator writes:

Why would the spies go to a harlot's house? It was likely to be a promiscuous rendezvous of questionable characters who might be apt to indulge in loose talk and unwittingly divulge important military information.²⁴⁴

Perhaps, but the blundering spies fail to do any spying in Rahab's home. Fewell retorts, "The common argument that a brothel would have been the best place to secure information about the city only accents the fact that the spies neither ask questions nor eavesdrop on any conversations."²⁴⁵ Neglecting the possibility altogether that the spies had made their way to Rahab's home for purposes of

²⁴⁴ John Bright, "Joshua: Exposition: The Spies Enter Jericho," ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 559.

²⁴⁵ Fewell, 72.

soliciting sex is a staunch heteronormative reading that serves to keep the Scripture from getting out of control (read: abnormal). Keeping the text squarely in check by this evasive method ironically dodges any investigation into the theme of hospitality shown in the story.

It is far more fathomable in this respect to recognize holiness in Rahab by her actions of showing hospitality to the two travelers in hostile territory than in the Israelite men at her door. Perhaps Rahab's demonstration of hospitality in this story is a lesson in holiness upon which the story's theme can be founded; rather than the commonly held conception, that God can even use despicable harlots like Rahab to fulfill God's mission of territorial conquest. For example, one biblical commentary reads, "Even a harlot like Rahab might have a part to play in the fulfillment of divine purpose. That is the religious significance of this episode."²⁴⁶ This commonly interpreted heterosexist narrative suggests two things: 1) that God's message in this text is about using any and all means to overpower a city, and 2) that it does not matter how awful one might be—in this case "awful" being defined as female, foreign and a prostitute—God is still able to use the blemished individual despite their flaws. Althaus-Reid writes, "The focal point is seldom the so-called prostitute but rather an agenda of ideological issues which requires the use of the body of a prostitute to make a political or religious statement."²⁴⁷ Yes, the text says that Rahab

²⁴⁶ Bright, 559.

²⁴⁷ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 95.

is a harlot or a prostitute depending on the textual translation; however, many commentators challenge the notion that she was a prostitute by suggesting that perhaps her solitary living was the result of a family inheritance, and that she was not, in fact, in the business of offering sex for money. Even if that were true, it still falls in line with a heterosexist reading by even challenging whether Rahab was a prostitute. Pointing out that she might not be a prostitute further underlines the heterosexist interpretation that prostitution renders one a marginalized other not meriting an identity or voice.

A queer reading would agree with the aforementioned commentary to the extent that “even a harlot like Rahab has a part to play in the fulfillment of divine purpose,” but that purpose is not the limited outcome of territorial domination; rather, the purpose is geared toward exposing and correcting injustice.²⁴⁸ If Rahab is indeed a prostitute, is that bad, or is the heterosexist, patriarchal culture that sexually objectifies women and pushes Rahab to the margins bad? This question reflects back on the church’s heteronormative interpretation of this story in my interview with Lily:

Lily: I don’t understand. It seems to me that many churches, most of the time, don’t support some of the most subordinated groups in our society, like sex workers. Churches will say that prostitution is immoral. By just stating that and not mentioning the social structure, the equality for people is just completely out of context. As far as I know, most people who go into prostitution are from very poor families, and there’s a social inequality in that. It’s not just immoral. The real world is not easy for many people; it is difficult to survive. And if you just say that they’re immoral and you don’t consider where they came from, that’s very problematic for me.

²⁴⁸ Bright, 559.

Dan: So the church will sooner speak out against prostitution than the church will speak out against the social structures that cause the very things they're saying are immoral, and that's the end of it.

Lily: Yeah.²⁴⁹

Rahab is God's voice that woos the two spies into the home of a harlot to expose the injustice of a marginalized, closeted existence. This resonates with the lived experience of LGBTQ people, God's voices on the margins.

Holiness is recognized in Rahab by nature of her doing justly by her fugitive guests and loving mercy toward them in protecting their lives from the Canaanite military. Rahab's hospitable act of kindness to the two spies reciprocally obligates them to show her kindness in sparing her family's lives and hers when Israel will advance on the city. The spies vow to deal kindly and faithfully toward Rahab, but only if she keeps silent concerning the matter.²⁵⁰ Verse 17 says that the men wish to be "guiltless," hands washed, concerning the whole matter.

In the mind of the hetero experience, to stand alongside LGBTQ people and share in their oppression at the hands of a heteronormative society is to switch sides from the oppressor to the oppressed. Well-intentioned hetero people may be open to co-existing with the queer community, but often we straight folk stop short of sacrificing our power in a heteronormative society for the sake of our LGBTQ

²⁴⁹ Lily, interview.

²⁵⁰ John Bright, "Joshua: Exposition: Rahab's Overture," ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 561.

siblings. We are open to them, but we wish to remain guiltless in the matter of affirming them and advocating alongside them as companions. However, from the queer perspective, as we find in the queer reading of God's Word, there is no us and them, and there are no outsiders or insiders. To stand on the side of LGBTQ people and to affirm their lived experience is to proclaim that there is no binary division between us but a queer community enveloping us.

If Rahab squeals, if she comes out of her culturally prescribed closet and rats out the two men from mighty Israel for hiding in her home, then the spies are no longer her allies. The promise of her safety and her very existence is conditioned on her remaining in the closet. Althaus-Reid writes:

Rahab gives the men the gift of hiding them and they pay her back by promising to hide her in turn. The exchange of hiding however is deceptive in its apparent simplicity because for the men hiding presents an opening, or public appropriation of lands and culture (a colonization process), while for Rahab it represents a further development in logocentrism. That is the explanation of the declaration of logo-faith that the biblical writer puts into the mouth of a woman who belongs to a religious group other than the Israelites.²⁵¹

Are the two spies really dealing kindly toward Rahab? LGBTQ people do not need lip service from heteronormative culture to approve of their identity. They will speak from the truth of who they are as proof to the world that holiness exists more profoundly in their authenticity than in heterosexist morality. Like Rahab, LGBTQ people do not need conditional advocates to hold them at arm's length; rather, the queer community craves allies, companions who will stand alongside them as

²⁵¹ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 102-103.

testimony to the God who has no use for binary divisions. The queer perspective reveals that Rahab, like our LGBTQ siblings who constantly subvert heteronormative standards in order to promote justice for themselves and others, is a true steward of God's holiness.

Selecting Luke 7:36-50 for an Additional Queer Reading

The text of Luke 7:36-50 is titled in the Bible's *NIV*, "Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman." Interpreting this text through a queer lens finds that title lacking if not misleading. As opposed to Joshua 2, this story of a nameless woman making her way into the home of Simon the Pharisee to show her love for Jesus does appear in the Common Lectionary. Here, I offer a queer reading of this text because of the lessons it reveals on the nature of authentic hospitality.²⁵² Interpreting the woman as a lesbian pushed to the margins by heterosexist culture so much as to not even have a name in the story, I attempt to pull her into the narrative for purposes of informing an ecclesiology of hospitality that would emphasize LGBTQ perspectives. Additionally, this queer reading is more intentional in incorporating the perspectives of the interviewees. Portions of this reading are done in conversation with them so as to

²⁵² Additionally, a sermon I offered at Friends Congregational Church, 27 March 2011, titled, "Divine Disruptions: A Sermon Using Queer Biblical Criticism," is found in the Appendix for this study.

provide voice to the marginalized woman who has profound instructions for the church that seeks to be a house of welcome for all people.

Disrupting Abstract Hospitality: A Queer Reading of Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' —Luke 7:36-50, *NRSV*

We begin a queer reading of Luke 7:36-50 where it ends. In the home of Simon the Pharisee, surrounded by Simon's friends, Jesus says to the nameless woman in this story, "Go in peace." It is a comforting benediction, but as the credits roll on yet

another of Jesus' articulate lessons to the shamed Pharisees, the queer reader must wonder where the woman goes when she is commissioned to exit this story in peace.

In a commentary on the Book of Luke, Fred Craddock writes:

Where does one go when told by Christ, "Go in peace"? The price of the woman's way of life in the city has been removal from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."²⁵³

What is the woman's way of life that has pushed her to the margins, removing her from the supposed resources that might restore her? Bearing LGBTQ perspectives in mind, I see this woman as a lesbian who has been displaced from institutional normality by nature of her sexual orientation; institutional normality being determined, of course, by heteronormative culture.

So, where does a lesbian in Bryan-College Station go to maintain a spirit of peace within and around her? I know of LGBTQ-friendly businesses in our community, but I can count them on one hand. When a lesbian congregant and I were talking recently about date nights, I asked her where she enjoys going. Before giving me a few examples of where her partner and she like to spend time together, she said, "Well, there's really not a whole lot of places where we can go, you know?" My limited hetero experience in this context can make assumptions, and my experiences alongside my LGBTQ siblings offers me additional insight, but my full understanding of where LGBTQ people go physically, emotionally and spiritually to maintain peace

²⁵³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990), 106.

is limited to a perspective that is instructed by heteronormative culture to view others as abstractions; types of persons, not persons.

Working backward through the text now, the concept of where the lesbian in the story goes informs the nature of hospitality extended toward her in Simon's home or lack thereof. All that is revealed about the woman is that she is in the city and that she is a sinner; this is reinforced by Simon's inner monologue, where he says that a sinner is who and what type of person this woman is. Simon views her abstractly, as a type of person fitting into a particular category, not as a person. Deconstructing the text, now, the woman's supposed identity of "sinner" makes Simon and his guests "saved." She is the abnormal outsider confined to an existence in the city, whereas Simon and his friends can come and go anywhere and everywhere as they please, but Simon and his company need this woman in order to assert their own identity, to know who they are. As DiNovo writes, "Normal needs an abnormal to know itself."²⁵⁴

For Simon, normality merits hospitality, and abnormality does not. I interpret Simon's home as a church that says, as Craddock suggests, "You are welcome here." When that welcome is founded on abstract binaries, however, the church understands itself based on heteronormative morality. It becomes rooted in this identity rather than the gospel of Jesus Christ, and consequently offers Simon's Pharisaic hospitality to anyone falling outside the norm. This is symptomatic of inauthentic hospitality, the

²⁵⁴ DiNovo, 143.

ONA church being open to but not fully affirming of LGBTQ people; but DiNovo reminds us:

We are the church, we who believe. How do we know who we are? We love one another. And what does that look like? In the stories about Jesus, it looks like nonjudgment, it looks like hospitality, it looks like outreach to the marginalized. It does not look like morality... With Christ we are freed from sin, and as branches of his vine we are the new law if we reside in him. How do we know that we reside in him? We profess our belief and we love one another. A new kind of economy of the gift. A new sort of justice. All of it incarnate in one flesh and one body, Christ's.²⁵⁵

Forgetting our Christ-centered identity causes us to justify and condition hospitality toward others. It is an abandonment of hospitality for hostility where the question of "Where does she go," quickly constricts into, "Where has she been?" For the church that is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the question must change altogether: "How can we be a place of welcome for her, a place where she is received? How can we be a place where she can physically come and be herself emotionally and spiritually? How can we be a place where she can be fully involved in the body of Christ?" A queer reading of Luke 7:36-50 finds the nameless woman offering answers to these questions.

Pouring ointment on Jesus' feet, wiping his feet with her tears, kissing his feet: According to Jesus, these selfless gestures carried out by the woman are indicators of authentic hospitality. "The principal meaning and value in this story as it was told and heard in the meetings of the first believers lay in the emphasis it places

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 142.

upon the appropriateness and worth of devotion to Christ.”²⁵⁶ Stepping back from initial interpretations of the story’s principle meaning reveals shifts in the elements of the text. We might read the story as an example of why devotion to Christ is important (“she has shown great love”), but Jesus’ lesson for Simon and his guests is about what authentic hospitality looks like, and about setting aside abstract judgments of others in order for that hospitality to be activated.

Simon knows nothing about authentic hospitality because he has failed to acknowledge the woman in his home or to recognize her as anything other than a sinner. By forcing herself into his home and into this story that we now read centuries later, the woman and her queer voice witness to authentic hospitality; but this is only made possible by the woman not settling for the heterosexist binaries that define her marginalized existence. “Sometimes one violates the approved way not because one knows less than others, but more; not because one is not good enough to meet the approved standards, but because one is too good to be bound by them.”²⁵⁷ Forcing herself into the story, the woman utilizes hospitality to perform jujitsu on Simon’s home, where suddenly, according to Jesus, Simon and his guests are the self-inflated outsiders marginalized by their own ignorance. DiNovo extends this lesson to the church:

²⁵⁶ John Knox, “The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition: Devotion to Christ,” ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 142.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

Hospitality, the ethical imperative that runs through scripture, must be the imperative that runs through church life. This also is invitational to the outside. And once inside, it radically affects the way to do church. Hospitality extends throughout the week and prevents “us” and “them” thinking. If anything, the biblical witness says that the marginalized are the necessary inheritors of the church and its rightful owners. If this is not reflected in our structures or our pews, if we are not allowed to be our queer selves, our church is in danger of being more club than church.²⁵⁸

Simon’s home was certainly exposed as being more of a social club for the heteronormative elite than a hospitable environment for Jesus and anyone who might come with him. When Simon invites Jesus into his home, Jesus asks Simon the same question he asks of present day Christians who wish to invite Jesus into their hearts and their church home: “Can my friends come, too?”

Churches are constantly seeking ways to be more invitational, to be more open, and to grow as a consequence. In contrast with Simon’s home and his view of welcoming people, the church perishes the thought of being closed off from those whom Jesus cherishes, such as the nameless woman. Our congregations see Jesus uncover Simon’s shortsightedness and we boast, “That could never be us!” However, for the church to emphasize growth before the welcome, for the church to define the kind of growth it is looking for before it opens its doors to those whose very lives define and interpret growing from the branches of Christ, is for the church to hold God’s Spirit at arm’s length in an indifferent gesture of Pharisaic hospitality. DiNovo confesses how she fell into this temptation when her congregation was struggling with growing: “I recognized my addiction to church growth theory and church growth

²⁵⁸ DiNovo, 193.

itself. From there on in, all I or we could do was what we were called to do: be welcoming to the marginalized.”²⁵⁹ If the church seeks to understand God’s vision of growth and what a welcome would look like that encourages such growth, the church must move away from its own hostility of heteronormative abstractions and toward a free space of hospitality that seeks to bring in and emphasize the marginalized voices that bolster an authentic ecclesiology. The prolific theologian, Karl Barth, writes:

It is important to note that the Church is not formed by a human gathering of people who would have the same opinions, but by a divine convocation that constitutes into a corps of individuals until then scattered at the mercy of their opinions...The Church, being different from any other human community, thereby is catholic, that is universal. She is linked by no barrier, either of state, or of race, or of culture. Exclusively and properly belonging to no one, the Church belongs to everyone.²⁶⁰

For the church to belong to everyone insists that the body of Christ expand the free space enveloping it to include God’s diverse body of everyone, as well as their opinions, perspectives and lived experiences.

Joan discussed the church’s typical attempts at being more open and welcoming in her interview. She reveals that the congregation’s self-questioning on matters of inclusiveness is a means to an end:

I think most churches attempt hospitality, whether it’s the person that greets you at the door or having coffee for people in the mornings. All that stuff is good. I don’t know, though. Churches seem to go just far enough to say, “Hey, we’re doing the right thing. We’re doing the friendly thing. Here’s your coffee. Here’s your little program,” but it’s kind of like they don’t push past

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 45.

²⁶⁰ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 136, cited in DiNovo, 161.

that. I've been in churches for years and years; I used to be a youth minister in a Baptist church, so it's always something they talk about in council meetings: "How can we be friendlier to people?" And I think, "Really? You have to ask?" It should be basic human instinct, I think.²⁶¹

I might be putting words in Joan's mouth here, but our basic human instincts in this respect are largely formed by the same androcentric, hyper-masculine, patriarchal guidelines that have interpreted scripture for far too long. Joan points out that the church will only go so far in extending a welcome and not push past that boundary line. The extent to which they will push themselves stops at asking, "What can we do to be friendlier?" DiNovo would suggest that we get over our basic human instincts of abstract binaries and ask instead, "What can we do to be welcoming to the marginalized?" Such an inclusive, wide welcome would inform how a church might be friendlier (more hospitable) as branches firmly clinging to the vine of Jesus Christ.

Addressing this study's question, "We're ONA...now what?," the church is called to then affirm the marginalized voices in its midst, their perspectives and lived experiences. Doing so pushes past the same abstract lens through which Simon viewed the woman who forced herself into his home. Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" as means of guiding Simon away from an abstract outlook based on binaries and toward a concrete outlook based on personhood. When we hear Jesus speaking to us through the question he poses to Simon, Jesus becomes the lens through which we look at the world. "Looking through him to the world, we see things that the world does not see. We notice things that the world tends to overlook.

²⁶¹ Joan, interview.

Such is grace.”²⁶² When I asked the interviewees to talk about indicators of a church’s welcome to marginalized people, Lily’s response mirrored that of Jesus’ defense of the woman in Simon’s home.

Dan: What would indicate to you that a church is truly welcoming to those who are considered “different”?

Lily: Not imposing its beliefs on people who are “different,” and not trying to change them, to make them *not* different.²⁶³

Affirming our personhood, who we are fully, which includes affirming the sexual orientation and gender identity of our LGBTQ siblings, we topple the binaries that define the co-existent flock of straight people and LGBTQ people. Pushing past that heteronormative boundary, we become a queer community; a transverse community with no need of making the marginalized, whoever they may be, adapt to our understandings of morality. Such is grace, and such is an ecclesiology of hospitality that seeks to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives, the voices of the marginalized.

When it comes to authentic hospitality, DiNovo suggests, “The church is not seen as *formed*. The newcomer is not seen as *unformed*. Both are seen as in need of formation.”²⁶⁴ In his commentary, Craddock suggests that the woman in the story needs a community where she can be welcomed, and in which she can find the resources for restoration previously withheld from her by nature of Pharisaic

²⁶² William Willimon, “Do You See?,” ed. William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Year C, April – June 2010 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, Inc., 2010), 50.

²⁶³ Lily, interview.

²⁶⁴ DiNovo, 154.

hospitality. “This story screams the need for a church,” Craddock says.²⁶⁵ Yes, but a queer reading of the text finds that the church is in need of LGBTQ perspectives if it hopes to access resources for its own restoration, as well. Only then will the church be able to be a healing, transformative resource in which and by which the nameless woman and her marginalized peers might be themselves restored.

Conclusion: A New Perspective on David and Goliath

Queer biblical criticism, or queer reading as we have referred to it in this chapter, has enabled me to hear the voices of the LGBTQ interviewees for this study with much more prominence in the pages of Scripture. As the African-American experience of slavery is unmistakably linked to the story of Moses and the Israelites, LGBTQ people’s lived experience can be connected to the story of God and God’s people in ways that have yet to truly shake the foundations of the churches that have oppressed them for far too long.

From his interview, Paul’s testimony of his history in the church strikes me as a voice crying out from the pages of Scripture with a prophetic message in need of the church’s ear. When it came to one particular congregation from which Paul was asked to leave on account of his sexual orientation, he said:

²⁶⁵ Craddock, 106.

I stood up and told the truth and said who I am. It's kind of like I put the ball in their court. This didn't fall apart because I wasn't honest. It fell apart because they weren't honest.²⁶⁶

How often has the church fallen apart and further distanced itself from God's constantly unfolding, revelatory love as a result of being dishonest with itself concerning the oppression of LGBTQ people? How often have LGBTQ people attempted to live out their lives authentically and truthfully in the ecclesiological sphere, only to find the church being unwilling to embrace that authenticity and truth to its own detriment? Armed with queer biblical criticism, I asked these questions when looking at some of the stories from the Bible that the interviewees named as their favorites.

Paul did not share the story of David and Goliath as one of his favorite stories from Scripture, another one of the interviewees did; but I now read 1 Samuel 17 from the perspective of Paul's lived experience in church life. In this text, David is the youngest of Jesse's four sons. His older brothers get to go off and fight for Saul's army against the Philistines, while David remains home tending sheep and occasionally delivering food to his brothers on the frontlines of the battle. Due to his age, that is the role that he must play.

When Goliath, the mighty champion from Gath, calls out to Saul's army asking for an opponent to fight him, it is a seething taunt. For forty days Goliath stands in the open field chastising Saul's army, ridiculing them for their cowardice,

²⁶⁶ Paul, interview.

and prodding them to do something, to take action; but day after day, Saul's army recoils in fear. Goliath is the androcentric, hyper-masculine, patriarchal antagonist that keeps the church in chains. Day after day, year after year, Goliath scares the church into believing that there is no place for LGBTQ people in our congregations short of LGBTQ people adjusting their sexual orientation and gender identity to match the concepts of morality and normalcy that heteronormative culture requires. Goliath watches on as churches shrivel into irrelevance and institutional death as a result of their refusal to budge from their stance against LGBTQ people, and Goliath laughs. As surely as Goliath defied the ranks of Israel, Goliath continues to defy the church that remains overtly hostile or indifferently silent toward LGBTQ people.

Where is someone who will fight him?

David is obedient to his father, Jesse. He dutifully carries food to his brothers on the battlefield and returns to his father with news from the war. One day he overhears the taunts from Goliath directed at Saul's army, and it is more than he can stand. Suddenly, David defies his role, subverts his role, and inquires of Israel's soldiers about this injustice. He is determined to do something about it; but, David's elder brother and the great Saul himself do not easily adjust to his shift from normalcy. 1 Samuel 17:25-37, *NRSV*:

The Israelites said, 'Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel.' David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?' The people answered him in the same way, 'So shall it be done for the man

who kills him.’ His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking to the men; and Eliab’s anger was kindled against David. He said, ‘Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.’ David said, ‘What have I done now? It was only a question.’ He turned away from him towards another and spoke in the same way; and the people answered him again as before. When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. David said to Saul, ‘Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.’ But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.’ David said, ‘The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.’ So Saul said to David, ‘Go, and may the Lord be with you!’

We know how this story ends. Had David’s brother, Eliab, persisted in discouraging David, and if Saul had not changed his mind regarding David’s proper place, Goliath would have continued defying the ranks of Israel until they retreated entirely out of fear. Had David not been relentless (“What have I done now? It was only a question.”), had David not been persistent (He turned away from [Eliab] towards another and spoke in the same way; and the people answered him again as before), Saul would not have summoned for him, and Goliath would not have faced David at all. The point is clear that without David subverting his familial role and exerting tenacious persistence in the face of adversity, the ranks of Israel would not have achieved victory, and our church history (if we would have one at all now) would read much differently today.

Paul is David in this story. Paul is the lived experience of LGBTQ people who are pushed into submissive roles from which they are forbidden to deviate within churches who condescend to be open to them. Paul is the LGBTQ experience that is chided by the church's Eliabs who presume that LGBTQ people have evil in their heart if they stray from normalcy or challenge heteronormative morality. Paul is the LGBTQ experience standing before the authority of Saul, who says that it is not quite time for the church to fully welcome and affirm the queer community. This is Paul's experience as the David in waiting who will not give up on the church despite its oppression of him.

Paul has been shunned from churches in the past, as have those he loves. Paul's former partner died of AIDS, and while he was serving a church as a volunteer youth worker, he was served with insult upon injury when the pastor of that congregation asked him whether he had molested any of the kids. Paul has experienced a lion's share of Eliab's accusations and Saul's patronizing treatment. Even now, the church where Paul serves as the organist is affiliated with an organization that lists homosexuality being a sin as one of its core beliefs. This has caused for the executive director of that organization to call on the church's pastor demanding that Paul be removed from the church's staff on account of his sexual orientation. Although Paul has not been asked to step down, the church he serves dutifully has not broken its affiliation with the organization that called for him to be removed; the church has not spoken out against the Goliath that defies its ranks. Commenting on the situation, Paul says:

I did not really want to push it. On the other hand, if it comes to me, I'm going to be honest about things. [The church] is free to make whatever decisions they want to make around that, but I don't want to just slide off into the sunset because they're afraid to make a decision. You know, I want them to make a decision.²⁶⁷

When will our congregations' Eliab repent from his ridicule that keeps LGBTQ people in roles that accommodate the church's continued comfort with the status quo? When will our congregations' Saul stop relying on his own heteronormative voice to determine our understanding of the church and instead humble himself before LGBTQ people that their voices would inform our ecclesiological identity? Goliath is taunting the church, laughing at us as our prophetic voice loses its poignancy and our message loses its relevance in the world. Meanwhile, we have an opponent that is worthy to stand before the champion of Gath, Goliath, whose methods are limited to fear and manipulation of our binaries, categories, and rules. We have a David who witnesses to the love of God and the expanse of that love for all people, a David who can take down Goliath and reinvigorate the church and its prophetic voice and mission in this world. It is time for the marginalized David to come to the frontlines, for LGBTQ people to be fully affirmed in our ecclesiological hospitality, so that Goliath would fall. After all, if David, a boy perceived to be too inadequate to stand up to Israel's most feared foe, was braver and stronger than anyone in Saul's army, and if he was found to be more

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

authentically representative of the favor and power of God than anyone among the ranks of Israel, what does this suggest about the LGBTQ people in our midst?

I thank God for the lived experience of Paul and so many LGBTQ people like him, and I pray that they will not give up on the church for all our sakes.

CHAPTER SIX: THE QUEER IDENTITY OF THE ONA CHURCH

“A Queer theologian has many passports because she is a theologian in diaspora, that is, a theologian who explores at the crossroads of Christianity issues of self-identity and the identity of her community.”
—Marcella Althaus-Reid²⁶⁸

Practical Suggestions for Hospitality in the ONA Church

The ONA church strives to be an environment that is open to everyone regardless of who we are or where we come from. To be “Open and Affirming” is the church’s mission statement that seeks to defy culture’s hostile divisions; it is the church’s proclamation, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, that says, “We are not meant to be separated according to age, race, gender, ability, nationality, or sexual orientation; rather, we are meant to be unified according to Christ’s prayer, ‘that they may all be one.’” As refreshing as this statement sounds in the face of our world’s binaries, however, failing to affirm our respective identities within the ecclesiological sphere can exacerbate the very factors that cause divisions and hostility in our culture.

Nouwen writes:

Many places that are created to bring people closer together and help them form a peaceful community have degenerated into mental battlefields. Students in classrooms, teachers in faculty meetings, staff members in hospitals and co-workers in projects often find themselves paralyzed by

²⁶⁸ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 7.

mutual hostility, unable to realize their purposes because of fear, suspicion, and even blatant aggression. Sometimes institutions explicitly created to offer free time and free space to develop the most precious human potentials have become so dominated by hostile defensiveness that some of the best ideas and some of the most valuable feelings remain unexpressed.²⁶⁹

Based on Nouwen's spirituality of hospitality, I have argued that expanding the free space that envelopes our congregation invites the diversity of our authentic voices to speak from the fullness of our sacred identity within the ecclesiological sphere. For the ONA church to encourage and nurture such an expansive and expanding space means that LGBTQ perspectives are raised and recognized, fully affirmed, thereby informing the identity of the congregation as a whole. This leads to the culmination of a queer community that defies heteronormative binaries and categorizations, and that further informs the church's hospitality geared toward LGBTQ perspectives.

Nouwen writes, "The church is perhaps one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are but with whom we can form a larger family."²⁷⁰ How we treat one another as an ONA church family and how we live out our ONA church family values is exactly what LGBTQ people visiting the ONA congregation are observing to determine the extent of hospitality's authenticity toward them. I argue that emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives in our hospitality toward one another within the ONA church authenticates the welcome extended to LGBTQ people outside the church. This demonstrates the expansion of free space within our congregation that is founded on Nouwen's movement from hostility to hospitality.

²⁶⁹ Nouwen, 47.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

Expanding the free space that liberates all people from the world's hostility serves to nurture a healthy ONA church family. To enact this movement, I offer here practical suggestions for ecclesiological hospitality that seeks to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives within the ONA congregation.

Use queer biblical criticism to inform preaching: In a recent New Member Class held at our church, an “us-and-them” issue, as Nouwen might refer to it, was raised. A hetero individual disclosed to the group of roughly 20 people, most of whom were LGBTQ people, that they felt like a minority in our congregation, and that they were reminded of this troubling feeling from the sermons that spoke specifically about LGBTQ topics. Out of this concern, they raised a semi-rhetorical question, asking, “What’s the big deal? Why do the sermons have to differentiate gay from straight, and then focus only on gay stuff?” A conversation ensued about the need to address our differences in a sense of appreciation and affirmation, and how this is a particularly intense need in the souls of LGBTQ people. A college-age gay male added, “For me, I need to hear it. I need to hear from the pulpit that it’s okay for me to be gay. That’s one of the main reasons why I’m here in this church at all.” Queer biblical criticism seeks to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives while also dissolving the binaries that divide gay from straight. Not only does such a hermeneutical approach affirm LGBTQ people who need to hear a message of hope that speaks to their lived experience, it soothes the potential hostility that can arise between the hetero and LGBTQ communities within the church.

Observe an ONA Sunday: While it is helpful to have an ONA Statement, without attention drawn to what that statement means within the observance of worship, its meaning runs the risk of becoming dull or even forgotten. Forming a worship service whose liturgy, music, theme and message revolve around the church's ONA identity is a reminder to the church of the history that has formed its diverse (queer) body of Christ, and of its call for that unmistakable body to be scattered for ministry in the world. Testimonies might be offered from LGBTQ church members that share with the congregation what the church's ONA identity means to them and their life of faith. Hetero family members of LGBTQ people from parents to siblings to children and youth could speak to what the inclusiveness and support of the ONA church mean to their family that does not match the assumptions and prerequisites of heteronormative society. The sermon could address the so-called clobber passages that are manipulated against LGBTQ people, so as to redefine them in light of ONA interpretations. Furthermore, worship services that thank God for the gift of being an ONA church serve to educate our children and youth about the importance of fully welcoming and including all of God's people in our congregation and the transformative power that such inclusion yields in our lives.

Establish small group ministries that intentionally discuss relationships and sexuality:

Here, I offer two examples. First, our congregation has a small group ministry called

Theology on Tap that meets weekly in a local Irish pub in the downtown Bryan area. The group of an average number of ten attendees varies in age, gender, race and sexual orientation. Relationships have blossomed because of those beautiful differences, and they have led to renewed understandings of relationships themselves. After hearing one of our gay male participants in the group talk about his relationship with this partner and how much they were looking forward to their upcoming wedding, another of the group's participants, a Baby Boomer-age hetero female and widow, shared with our group, "I really like that, the way you refer to each other as partners. It sounds better than husband and wife, and even better than spouse. If I have a partner, it sounds like cooperation and mutuality and equality. That sounds healthy. That sounds like true love."

Second, our congregation has a men's ministry that meets for breakfast on a Sunday before worship every other month. Going around the table, we often share what we are thankful for, areas in our lives in need of prayer, and ideas for ministry in our church and community. Often a hetero male will talk about their relationship with their spouse, followed by a gay male mentioning news about their partner. There is love for one another and trust shown in these offerings about our different relationships, and our conversations serve to break down the often false stereotypes that men harbor about gay or straight relationships.

One of our gay male participants in the group approached me after a men's ministry breakfast a few months ago and said, "This really is wonderful. Where else in our community are you going to find gay men and straight men sitting down for

breakfast together and sharing their lives with each other?” Kundtz and Schlager

write:

Queer people form relationships—whether or not they are sanctioned. This is an example of our not being willing to wait for the world to decide who we are and what we can or cannot do. We live now. It would be both unreasonable and unhealthy to put one’s life on hold until some religious or civil authority finally makes up its collective mind. Good pastoral care will help LGBTQ people sustain healthy, life-giving relationships now.²⁷¹

Small groups, like Theology on Tap and the Men’s Ministry group, empower us to be ministerial caregivers to one another, nurturing and supporting our various relationships, and learning the variant ways that God expresses the meaning of covenant within those relationships.

The intimacy of small groups in the ONA church allows for a diversity of people to establish relationships with each other. Sutherland writes, “To encounter another is to engage in hearing. Whereas seeing another human is critical, it is only in speaking and hearing that one crosses into the boundary of relationship.”²⁷² This promotes intentionality within those small groups to discuss our respective relationships and sexuality, thereby squelching taboo fears that keep such matters out of our religious dialogue. Removing such fears reinforces our strength to speak freely and truthfully with one another in the free space of hospitality, dissolving further heteronormative binaries that only serve to divide us from one another.

²⁷¹ Kundtz and Schlager, 57.

²⁷² Sutherland, 38.

Provide queer Bible studies: The exercise of disrupting Scripture and discovering refreshing interpretations of the Word of God is an exciting proposal to the church. Forming small group Bible studies that utilize a queer reading of the story of God and God's people empowers the ONA congregation to revisit and reclaim the texts that have divided us one from another on the basis of gender and sexual orientation. Asking each other dialogically who is missing from the text, who is being denigrated and for what purpose, draws our shared perspectives of marginality into the Bible study, and it encourages us to advocate as the body of Christ for the voice of the marginalized "other" in Scripture. It informs our understanding of and thanksgiving for the gospel of Jesus Christ, which in turn informs our identity as a congregation. As Farley asserts, "Gospel is—and this is its prophetic element—disruption, an exposure of corporate oppression and individual collusion, and, at the same time, an uncovering of redemptive possibilities."²⁷³

Connect with and provide services and/or referrals for the LGBTQ lived experience:

Kundtz and Schlager remind us:

Full social and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ people will not be achieved by legal and legislative remedies alone. Only when other important social institutions open their doors to enlightened discussion will some of the final obstacles to full equality really disappear.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Farley, 81.

They add:

In many instances society says “no” to LGBTQ people: They can’t get married or adopt children or join the armed forces as out individuals (in most places in the world). In some places and times they are not allowed to teach children. Some schools will not accept them as students; most churches will not ordain them. Many civil jurisdictions do not include them in nondiscrimination policies. Many employers reject them. All that creativity, service, and life are denied to the world; all those opportunities to serve and create are lost to the individuals.²⁷⁵

The ONA congregation seeking to provide hospitality that attempts to connect with these lived experiences might ask: Is there a need for legal services that are not easily obtained by LGBTQ people, such as preparing a will or handling child custody issues, and would our congregation be able to assist in such matters? Are there heteronormative social events in the community that are never offered for LGBTQ people; if so, what are they, and can the church be an environment to fill that niche? Maybe our congregation could be intentional in creating LGBTQ intergenerational mixers, given the lack of such opportunities in the community. As Kundtz and Schlager point out, “Bringing together young and old LGBTQ people is the challenge. What better place than church?”²⁷⁶ How might our congregation encourage the unappreciated gifts of LGBTQ people, their creativity and service, to be used? These ideas, questions and voices would dance in the ecclesiological free

²⁷⁴ Kundtz and Schlager, viii.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 49.

space of the ONA church for purposes of informing a hospitality that is more welcoming to LGBTQ people.

Aside from these practical suggestions, it is important for the congregation to recognize its own queerness. When the ONA church understands that its oneness in Christ unites them as hetero and LGBTQ Christians baptized into one body that disregards divisions of gender identity and sexual orientation, queer community is established that incarnates Nouwen's spiritual space. Within this free, expansive and expanding space, fellow congregants affirm one another, cherish one another's voices, and encourage each other to share our convictions and creativity on how to live out our mutual ONA identity. These are the sacred conversations that defy hostility and advocate for the marginalized who are indicated in the church's ONA Statement. In an attempt to call our congregation to recognize its own queerness in this respect, I preached the following sermon on Transfiguration Sunday that I now offer for this study.

Queer Preaching: A Sermon Calling the ONA Community to Recognize its Own Queerness

The following sermon, titled "The Island of Misfit Toys," was delivered by Rev. Dan De Leon at Friends Congregational Church on Transfiguration Sunday, March 6,

2011. It is based on the lectionary Gospel text of Matthew 17:1-9, and the additional text of Galatians 3:26-29.²⁷⁷

I want to start this morning's sermon with a little history lesson about our own church family. A few years back our friends Britney and Chris Gomes were looking for a church. The fact that Britney and Chris had two beautiful sons only added to their desire to find a church where their family could plant some roots and grow with a community in the love of Christ. We certainly don't have a shortage of churches here in the Bryan-College Station area. You'd think that Britney and Chris would have found a church home sooner rather than later. But there was one problem: Britney is black and her husband, Chris, is white.

Britney has shared her testimony about Chris' and her church search with our congregation's New Member Classes in the past: She says that whenever Chris and she and their children would darken the doors of a church, heads would turn and shoot stares at this interracial couple and their beautiful children. Sometimes people's stares were unfriendly. Sometimes people looked at them like they didn't really know what to make of them or what to do with them. And some people would stare at them with smiles that were relishing in the novelty of a couple like Britney and Chris; smiles that seemed to say, "You are welcome here so long as you act the way that we presume you are supposed to act based on our definition of who you are."

²⁷⁷ Dan De Leon, "The Island of Misfit Toys," delivered at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 6 March 2011.

A couple of months ago when we were hosting homeless families in this place for Family Promise, Britney and Chris and their boys, were here with the families, our guests. I walked in to find them playing the game Catchphrase with the families; you have to get your teammates to guess a word without saying the word itself to them, or any other words that are too obviously related to that word. The game is on a timer, too, so the adrenaline's pumping to get your teammates to guess the right answer and pass the timer to the person next to you before the buzzer goes off. Whenever Britney's team would score a point, she and her teammates would celebrate with loud shouts, and the kids would jump up out of their seats and do a little victory dance. This prompted Britney to recall out loud her upbringing in the Baptist church, and how people would be overcome with the Spirit, and they would start jumping up and down with their hands in the air. And Britney started celebrating in that fashion, like she was all of a sudden transported to the church of her upbringing and overcome with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Now, if Britney had expressed that kind of joy in that kind of way during the church search, Chris and she might have been booted out of some of those places they visited. That wasn't the way they were supposed to behave after all!

Needless to say, Britney and Chris' church search came to a halt pretty quickly. But then Britney's friend Lallah told her about a church where she and her husband, Gregg, and their two children were attending. Lallah told Britney, "Give this church a try. You'll be welcome there." And Britney said, "Not a chance. We're done." But Lallah persisted. Lallah told Britney about how her husband, who was

skeptical about church in general, had made a deal with her that if she could find a church that accepted *everybody* that he would come to church with her. Gregg said this with the Napoleonic certainty that there was no way that Lallah would be able to find a church like that. Well, Lallah found Friends Congregational Church and the rest, as they say, is history.

Sharing that story with her friend Britney, Lallah convinced Britney to get her family to visit Friends Church. And when Britney, Chris, and their sons darkened the door of this church, they found not only a place where they could fit in (perhaps the most difficult thing to find in our world these days); they found a place where they belonged. Like Lallah and Gregg before them, Britney and Chris had found the island of misfit toys.

Over the years I have heard a couple of congregants in this place refer to our church family by that title. Those congregants say we are the island of misfit toys—this is, of course, based on the “Island of Misfit Toys” from the 1964 *Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer* TV movie—and they say that with different emotions. Sometimes it’s said playfully, tongue-in-cheek. My friends Sheryl and Veronica Stanley even gave our family a Christmas ornament a couple of years ago that has the toys from the island of misfit toys on it; and Sheryl jokes with me about who is who, saying, “I’m the little girl doll!” (And I’m not going to tell you who she says the other characters are in this congregation...unless you buy me lunch). But I have also heard it said that we are the island of misfit toys with a sense of sadness, as if we have been banished

here like those misfit toys in the old claymation movie, and this is now our congregational lot in life.

I've held onto that title for a few years now, and I've thought about those emotions that it stirs up in our flock for those who use it to describe this church. I've always kept it in the back of my mind thinking, "Maybe, someday years from now I can preach a sermon as a gesture of pastoral care where I assure our flock that we are not the island of misfit toys." That's what I wanted to do for a long time, but I can't do that anymore. I'd just be running away from the truth.

One of our church members and I had the opportunity to visit for a while this past week, and she asked me about my doctoral study and how it was going. This church member is gay. She said, "I know that your study is focusing on hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, but why the 'Q'? Why did you add that on there?" The acronym LGBTQ stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.' She went on to say, "When I hear that word, 'queer,' a couple of different things come to mind. For one thing, it sounds like an overt comment, like I'm saying, 'In your face!' But on the other hand, it sounds derogatory, like an insult against me. But either way," she said, "it's true."

We, all of us, here at Friends Congregational Church are the island of misfit toys; and if we're going to understand what that means and get to a point where we can embrace that instead of just laugh about it or be sad about it, we need to revisit that precarious word 'queer.' This word scares us. We are afraid to talk about it. It has connotations that bring us fear. To talk about a word like 'queer' in church is like

when we put the word Leviticus on our church marquee out front, which we did not too long ago. Seeing the word Leviticus on our church sign strikes fear in the hearts of some of our LGBTQ church members, because Leviticus 18:22 has been used as a clobber passage against them for far too long by the church. It's no wonder that when a gay or lesbian person sees the word Leviticus on our church's sign that they are overcome with feelings (symptoms) bordering on PTSD. But the Word of God, the Bible, in its entirety, which belongs to all people, gay and straight, is not meant to strike fear in the hearts of some while others remain comfortable. The same can be said of this word 'queer.' It may initially bring us fear to talk about it, but that's what today is all about.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is a day that has entirely to do with fear. Some of the disciples, Peter, James, and John, are on top of this mountain with Jesus. And suddenly, right before their eyes, Jesus is transfigured. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white. A cloud enveloped them and a voice spoke to them from out of that cloud saying, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" And the disciples fall on the ground facedown, terrified.

The transfiguration records the fact that God has broken into our world through Jesus. But for the disciples, the transfiguration was a bright, shining, terrifying moment when they saw Jesus for who really was. God reveals Jesus' true identity to the world, and how is it received? With fear.

The Apostle Paul continues to reveal the true identity of Jesus Christ to the world in the book of Galatians when he testifies that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; we are all one. That oneness that has no use for hostile divisions, that oneness is what is met by a world divided by race, gender, nationality, age and sexual orientation with fear. And when we are baptized into Christ we clothe ourselves with Christ, and we are transformed into living examples of that oneness. For many church-going Christians in our heteronormative society, this is a scary thing. When pockets of Christianity use clobber passages like Leviticus 18:22 to demonize LGBTQ people, but then turn around and testify to a God who receives us all in the oneness of Christ, hypocrisy sets in, and hypocrisy leads to self-loathing, and self-loathing is more susceptible to and easily tempted by fear.

One of the LGBTQ people I interviewed for my doctoral study was a therapist in his early fifties named Paul. Paul talked about how the folks who insisted more strongly than his other patients that they had the most wonderful families, those folks had the most numerous and deeply afflicting issues. Paul said that those issues were a direct correlation with how sick the families really were. From his experience as a gay man, Paul saw this as one of his metaphorical contrasts with the church. He said, “The church is made of humans, so it’s going to have its flaws. I don’t mind that; I even expect that. It’s just that some of the church’s biggest supposed flaws are what it

preaches against the most.”²⁷⁸ It’s frustrating that the church fears change, but it’s tragic that the church fears transformation.

When we are baptized into the oneness of Christ, we are transformed into new creations. We are transformed into a new identity that throws out the divisions of nationality and social status and gender identity. That means that all binaries and categorizations that used to separate us one from another in terms of normal and abnormal, typical and atypical, heterosexual and homosexual dissolve. And when we are made one, worshipping the same God and serving the same God that our LGBTQ siblings worship and serve, then we become, all of us, a queer community.

Marcella Althaus-Reid was a profound theological mind, and she wrote a book called *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*. She writes this:

Queer is a word which originally meant ‘transverse’ or ‘oblique’ and it is used in a positive way. Queer theory celebrates diversity, the crossing of borders and imprecise frontiers. It liberates the assumed reference of theology and therefore liberates Godself from assumptions and ideological justifications.”²⁷⁹

See, in queer community, we are called to be more than passively open to one another; we are called to be proactively affirming of one another, valuing and honoring the truth of who we are as individuals. The Christ in me sees the Christ in you, and in that relationship we are transformed into a oneness that trumps this world’s divisions. The word ‘transfigured’ that we find in Matthew 17:2 is used by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he writes about the Christian community:

²⁷⁸ Paul, interview.

²⁷⁹ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 143.

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is spirit.”

To be in community with our LGBTQ siblings in this place, to stand alongside our LGBTQ siblings in this place, to worship and to serve and to love and to be called by the same God as our LGBTQ siblings worship and serve and love and are called by in this place might appear to the world to be little bit queer. It might cause us all to look a bit queer, but our queer identity is not based on the binaries that give our hostile world its identity. Normal must point to an abnormal, or it has no identity. Typical must have an atypical, or it has no identity. But we are not abnormal and we are not atypical. We are not some alternative way of Christian living that confirms the antagonism of the Christian right. We do not view being Open and Affirming as an alternative to the norm. We do not view our church family of various races, nationalities, ages, gender identities and sexual orientations as some alternative way of living outside the norm. We are God’s island of misfit toys. And just like a misfit elf who wants to be a dentist instead of a toymaker, we have a diversity of gifts to share with this world that are essential to the progress of humanity and essential to the ongoing act of co-creation that is cherished by our Creator God. We are queer community that seeks every day to be transformed by the oneness that is found in Christ Jesus.

Over the years, I have received mail that I consider to be hateful. I’ve received hate emails from time to time (not nearly as much as you’d imagine, but I receive

them nonetheless). They're always anonymous, always antagonistic, and always self-loathing in tone. One email I got a while back was from a fellow Christian who felt that it was his duty to rebuke me, because I am a preacher, and therefore I wield authority in the church. And I thought, "Obviously, this guy hasn't been in a UCC church, but oh, well!" He talked about that tired song-and-dance about homosexuality being sinful and gay people having no place in the church, and he told me that because I teach and preach in the church about God's love of LGBTQ people, that makes me worse than being gay. Well, I believe that I'm better than being straight. I am a Christian, named and claimed by a love that will not let me go. I am a Christian transformed by the overflowing love of God revealed in the transfigured Christ, in whom we are all made one. I am a Christian who serves and worships and loves and is called by my Creator who transcends all binaries and divisions and hostilities, the original Queer, Yahweh, Jehovah, Elohim, the Lord, my rock and my redeemer. And transformed by God's unrelenting love, I refuse to be drowned by self-loathing and fear. I am instead liberated and set free on the island of misfit toys. For the queer community that seeks to transform this world by one act of love at a time, thanks be to God. Amen.

Queering: The Expansive and Expanding Queer Move from Hostility to Hospitality

Recognizing our queerness of being a fellowship of believers not suffocated by culture's hostile divisions, the ONA congregation stands ready to reevaluate the Scriptures and theologies that have shaped the gospel of Jesus Christ, in which it as a church is rooted, for centuries. There is power in the ONA congregation's queer identity, because there is freedom found in this disruptive exercise. DiNovo writes:

“Queer”...is simply the person in the parlor whispering game who hears something no one else has heard to that point, or mishears, and slightly shifts the word—not enough so that we are no longer playing the game with the phrase, but enough so that new life is brought to an old game.²⁸⁰

This is the disruptive, liberating and powerful act of queering.

The queer community, as it was suggested in the aforementioned sermon, is not an alternative from the norm. Likewise, it does not seek an alternative foundation for its faith; rather, in the act of queering, refreshing ways of viewing its traditional foundation are revealed and established. For example, DiNovo describes how even the traditional practice of watching TV can be queered and reinterpreted in liberating ways within a community of faith:

For Lent one year, I announced that I was giving up TV for forty days. The majority of the morning service understood this as a hardship. For many in the

²⁸⁰ DiNovo, 56.

evening service who couldn't afford a TV, some of whom were homeless, it wasn't much of a "discipline." Their lived reality helped "us" live our resolves. What actions seemed queer to our unchurched friends and family became less queer in our church family.²⁸¹

Queering dismisses assumptions that bolster particular ways of looking at things, such as the ill-informed notion that all human beings own at least one TV or at least have easy access to one, and reshapes our perspectives in refreshing ways. In this case, an affluent portion of the body of Christ in DiNovo's congregation was able to reevaluate a Lenten discipline in light of their lower-income siblings' lived experience. The result was a shift from thinking that giving up TV was queer and toward believing that an omission of anyone's lived experience in this respect was unjust. This is what queering seeks to accomplish: an authentication of the gospel of Jesus Christ that looses even the bondage of preconceived notions; certainly the preconceived yokes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and hierarchical hyper-masculinity.

An examination of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveals that queering is at the heart of the Gospel message: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17, *NIV*). In a sermon delivered at First Baptist Church of Austin on this text, Roger Paynter preached, "Jesus makes it very clear that while he has not come to do away with the law, he has come to breathe new life into it. He has come that we might get a fresh understanding of how to live this out in the world."²⁸² Applying queer criticism to

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

biblical interpretation is essentially viewing Scripture through the lens of Jesus. Informed by the very identity of Jesus, the act of queering does not shove tradition aside for the sake of some radical alternative; rather, it reencounters tradition in order to reclaim and pronounce its vitality. Althaus-Reid writes, “There are basically two kinds of readings: the one which interprets to legitimize structures of power, and the one which questions the interpretation and the power itself.”²⁸³ Jesus certainly does not legitimize the existing power structures of his day, but he does not dismiss or avoid them either. Like the Palm Sunday Jesus riding into the opposite side of Jerusalem on an unlikely donkey instead of in a mighty horse-drawn chariot, queer biblical criticism does not tiptoe around widely accepted scriptural interpretations, but instead directly confronts their validity by questioning their origins and the legitimacy of their power. Liberated from the restrictions of exclusivist interpretations, the Law and the Prophets are revitalized with new life that surpasses previously accepted views of Scripture that had omitted the queer other. This is the nature of queer biblical criticism or queering.

When the ONA church adopts queering as a means of biblical criticism, hospitality is extended to LGBTQ people by applying their lived experience to scriptural interpretation and, thereby, renewing or reinvigorating the church’s identity. Goss writes:

²⁸² Roger A. Paynter, “The Genius of Jesus: An Invitation to the Real World: Creating Righteousness,” delivered at First Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, 13 February 2011.

²⁸³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 17.

A queer Christology begins with the experience of homophobic oppression and gay/lesbian reverse discursive experience. It is discourse rooted in gay/lesbian practice. This is the practice of Christology constructed in the midst of human suffering and real oppression: it stands contrary to the practices of ecclesial Christology.²⁸⁴

If ecclesiology has been shaped by previously accepted biblical criticism, or lack thereof, then the church must face its own heterosexist roots that have, heretofore, squelched the LGBTQ lived experience. That experience, inherent in the act of queering, has the power to liberate ecclesiology from this ossified identity that falls short of the Gospel message. Althaus-Reid writes:

Queering theology, we can see that in fact Jesus died and was resurrected throughout the whole narrative of the Gospels. Resurrection is an ever-present theme... In reality, the cross is the attempt to kill once and for all the multiple resurrections of a Queer Jesus, to fix him once and for ever on a stable cross so that no Queer God would do what Queer Gods do, that is, to exceed the border limits of a fatigued heterosexual foundational epistemology which has reduced religious experience and human love.²⁸⁵

The lived experience of LGBTQ people is too keen to overlook the lacunae of the ONA church passively welcoming them but falling short of applying their queer identity to ecclesiological hospitality. Rooted in the LGBTQ lived experience, queering is the act of radical hospitality that authenticates a welcome toward LGBTQ people by demonstratively releasing the genius of the Gospel message, which

²⁸⁴ Goss, 163.

²⁸⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 176.

includes and empowers all people to the glory of God. This is the expansive and expanding queer move from hostility to ecclesiological hospitality.²⁸⁶

Unleashing the Queer Genius of the Gospel

Friends Congregational Church belongs to a denomination that strives to be a “united and uniting church,” with that unity being realized in the oneness of Christ, which transcends all gender binaries. As mentioned in the above sermon, this establishes the queer identity through which the United Church of Christ congregation is more authentically equipped to articulate its slogan: God is still speaking.²⁸⁷ Althaus-Reid writes:

Because [Jesus] had not challenged the basic political and religious patriarchal structure of his time, much less of our times, the New Testament cannot be understood except as part of an incomplete process of conscientization. Generosity, pardon, reconciliation, justice and peace still have masculine substrata in the message of Christ: those of his experience of life as a man.²⁸⁸

Queering liberates the gospel of Jesus Christ from the heteronormative experience under which’s yoke its interpretation has fallen short of criticizing power structures that justify themselves and legitimate their identity based on gender binaries and

²⁸⁶ A sermon I preached at Friends Congregational Church on March 20, 2011 titled, “What Makes a Christian: Moving from Hostility to Hospitality,” included in the “Appendix” of this study, explains this concept of the expansive and expanding movement from hostility to hospitality.

²⁸⁷ More information on the United Church of Christ’s “God is Still Speaking” campaign can be accessed at <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/>.

²⁸⁸ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 51.

heterosexist categorizations. In the context of ecclesiology, which has justified its existence in large part on such binaries and categorizations, queering empowers all of the ONA church's congregants, gay and straight, to realize the incompleteness of the church's identity, as it is founded upon a gospel that, as Althaus-Reid points out, is incomplete in its own realization. She continues:

The assumptions about Christ's masculinity are based on a biological confusion between gender and sexuality. But gender roles are behaviorally shaped by culture. Christologies based on Jesus' masculinity as a given role are in fact political categories assuming power relations in public and private spheres of life. The point isn't that we cannot read in the narratives Jesus' sexual options, if he had them, because probably he was also like a ritual prostitute selling his given, fixed construction of masculinity to the religious movement he belonged to in order to be accepted.²⁸⁹

The very message of the gospel as preached and taught by Jesus was limited to his heteronormative experience, and that message has been maintained by layers upon layers of patriarchal interpretation to the detriment of Jesus as well as his message. The message is liberation (Luke 4:18, *NRSV*: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free"), which calls upon a queer interpretation to liberate Jesus himself from the confines of his sociological, temporal experience so that the message itself would also be set free. Goss writes:

Queer criticism deconstructs Christology as universal truth-claims, locating it within the shifting cultural systems of which it is a part... Queer criticism uses

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 92.

biblical criticism to discover the dangerous memory of Jesus lost beneath nearly two millennia of patriarchal and ecclesial formulations.²⁹⁰

DiNovo adds, “Faith must be, in a sense, found wanting, just short of faith, to be reaffirmed as faith. It is never certainty. It is never fast. That is why it is always and ever faith.”²⁹¹ In this sense, queering breaks apart the absolutes that stifle faithful interpretations of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Goss writes:

Queer criticism recognizes Christological discourse as historically constructed through misogyny, antisexuality, and homophobia. A queer Christology starts with Jesus’ practice and death and reconstructs the claims of Easter within queer critical practice.²⁹²

The queer genius of the gospel, then, liberates Jesus *from* the hyper-masculine tomb of hermeneutical interpretation and resurrects him *into* the lived experience of all people. It disrupts the yoke of patriarchy so that the gospel message that has been held captive by that theologically impotent interpretation is liberated for the sake of God’s justice, mercy and love intended for everyone. As Ritley writes:

The gospel is not about smoothing over the issues that divide us, nor integration in the sense of making us all agree, think alike, or even worship alike. It is about affirming the godly identity of every human being, even those whom we find strange (or queer).²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Goss, 141.

²⁹¹ DiNovo, 60.

²⁹² Goss, 154.

²⁹³ Countryman and Ritley, 25.

Embracing the queer genius of the gospel, the ONA congregation rediscovers the expansiveness of God's justice and applies that revelation to its own ecclesiological identity. Nouwen's movement from hostility to hospitality resurfaces here, calling upon the ONA's queer community to expand the ecclesiological space in which all people are then reaffirmed as uniquely, wonderfully made in the image of God, and no longer in the categorical abstractions of heteronormative culture. Kundtz and Schlager write:

God is the giver of all life to all people. This life is given in myriad ways, all of them reflecting something of the nature of the Giver. Thus, God gives each of us our sexuality (one's sexual makeup), which includes our orientation (to whom one is sexually attracted) and our gender identity (the gender one knows oneself to be), as a part of our total gift of humanity.²⁹⁴

If God is the giver of all life, and if each of us, gay or straight, is made in the image of this God, then the relationships that we nurture reflect the expansiveness of that life-giving God. Understood in queer terminology, LGBTQ relationships within and among the ONA community are not held against societal norms as abnormal or some abstract alternative; rather, they are proclaimed as a celebration of the vastness of God's love.

This further unleashes the queer genius of the gospel when it informs the church's understanding of social justice. Althaus-Reid writes, "If God is to be found in human relationships of economic and loving orders, it is obvious that the right not

²⁹⁴ Kundtz and Schlager, 2.

to be straight in a capitalist society and church has the goal of liberating God.”²⁹⁵ It becomes a matter of social justice, then, for the ONA’s queer community to urge all people out of their closeted existence and into the fullness of their being for purposes of revealing the fullness of God’s justice, mercy and love; something Goldman refers to as “queering the mainstream.” She writes:

Queering the mainstream is helpful in understanding the essence of the gay rights movement’s drive to get conventional society to mainstream ‘queer’ identity so that it becomes a part of the mainstream. The implementation of this concept is central. It frees people too often viewed as less than in society to be a part of society.²⁹⁶

From the standpoint of the gospel’s queer genius, however, this outward expression of justice does not stop at elevating LGBTQ people into the mainstream; it challenges the legitimacy of power that bolsters mainstream consciousness and identity in the first place. The queer genius of the gospel is found in its disruption of normalcy by which the so-called institutional and sociological powers of oppression are girded.

Althaus-Reid cites a powerful testament to the queer genius of the gospel being unleashed on supposed powers that fearfully attempt to hold God captive and to keep God’s people in chains. In *Indecent Theology*, she mentions the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. These were women whose children had been abducted and often times later tortured and killed by the Argentine army during the state-sponsored Dirty War from 1976 to 1983. Defying the military dictatorship, a group of women who

²⁹⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 98.

²⁹⁶ Goldman, 30.

had lost their children started demonstrations at the Plaza de Mayo in Central Buenos Aires in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace on April 30, 1977.²⁹⁷ Wearing white scarves around their heads with their sons' and daughters' names embroidered as a symbol of their lost children's blankets, bereaved mothers and grandmothers gathered at the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday keeping injustice visible and demanding from the oppressive military powers that they be reunited with their children.²⁹⁸ The dictatorship and cultural powers of Argentina, including the Church, found the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's actions abhorrent and disruptive. This was not simply because of their cries for justice; rather, it was because of the manner in which they protested.

Argentine women were perceived through the lens of *La Virgen María*, the Virgin Mary, who was culturally interpreted as a symbol of submission for God's divine purposes to be carried out and maintained. When bereaved women stood in defiance of the patriarchal power structure that assumed to keep order through the submissive silence of disappeared children's mothers and grandmothers, this heterosexist theology, which Althaus-Reid terms Mariology, was disrupted:

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo challenged a model of femininity; they were 'women on their own,' without visible men, poor women yet independent, challenging a political and religious system. The newspapers of the time called them 'the crazy ones' of Plaza de Mayo. They were Catholic women

²⁹⁷ Accessed from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothers_of_the_Plaza_de_Mayo, 22 March 2011.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

devoted to the *Virgen*, who through their political struggle discovered a new way of being women, and with it challenged the establishment.²⁹⁹

Seeing the women behave in a manner that did not fit the cultural interpretation of *La Virgen María* put the maintainers of religious order on edge. If the perfect submission of Argentina's women could not be maintained by the church, that theological shift might rock the foundations of cultural patriarchy and lead to a telling exposition and questioning of the legitimacy of the establishment's power. Althaus-Reid writes about Sra Hebe Bonafini, one of the founders of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo:

Bonafini... was advised by the bishops of Argentina to stop demanding the return of her disappeared children, and instead 'to go home and pray to the *Virgen María*.' Such is the power of domestication of the imposed Mariology that Sra Bonafini was among the women who needed to reject the worship of *La Virgen* in which they were brought up, in order to demand justice.³⁰⁰

Instead of being willing to acknowledge this disruption of power, the church told the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to go back to where they came from, literally and figuratively, and seek justice within the framework of a powerless theology. The Mothers' response was to breathe new life into *La Virgen María*, to disrupt that symbol of Divine authority, and thereby unleash the queer genius of the gospel on an establishment that was only powerful from a standpoint of fear; fear whose only way of maintaining authority is to hold God captive under oppressive interpretations steered by heterosexism and hyper-masculinity.

²⁹⁹ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 35.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Althaus-Reid's illustration stands in similar contrast with the ecclesial experience of LGBTQ people, an experience I was sharply reminded of a few years ago in my office. A college student named Justin had been visiting our church for a handful of Sundays.³⁰¹ Each time Justin attended he came alone carrying his Bible, and he would sit on the back row of the congregation. Eventually, Justin made an appointment for us to visit. Justin was a very pleasant guy, and he appeared genuinely interested in our church; but his interest was only to the extent of his own ecclesiological research. He had no desire to find out more about our programs or how he could get plugged in, much less any interest in church membership. What Justin wanted to know was how we were able to exist on a level of theological integrity while simultaneously proclaiming an ONA Statement. He appreciated our vision of "offering God's extravagant welcome to all," and he appreciated the notion that Christians are meant to be kind and compassionate to everyone. However, during his string of Sunday visits to Friends Congregational Church, Justin could not get his head around this: "How do you reconcile witnessing to gay people without insisting that they repent and change?" Justin appreciated the inclusion of LGBTQ people in our congregational life, but he could not accept that a church would do this without the condition that those LGBTQ people repent of their "sinful ways" and strive to be straight. He did not understand how our ministry to LGBTQ people would not attempt to make them hetero Christians. Justin was not being antagonistic, and he

³⁰¹ For purposes of this study, the name Justin is a pseudonym.

demonstrated what appeared to be a very humble curiosity; but his curiosity was rooted in hostility.

Like the bishop who urged Bonafini to go home and pray submissively to *La Virgen María*, countless ministers have counseled LGBTQ people to go home and pray away the gay in order to receive justice and mercy. Like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who were seen as disrupting the oppressive order of military dictatorship in Argentina, LGBTQ people are perceived as disruptions to the ecclesiological order that maintains Scripture's patriarchal, heterosexist, hyper-masculine interpretation. Justin's curiosity indicated his anxiety over that institutional fracture whether he knew it or not.

When the queer genius of the gospel is unleashed on the ONA church, that congregation recognizes this power shift and then moves to open the floodgates of God's justice and mercy through acts of ecclesiological hospitality that affirm LGBTQ perspectives and celebrate God's expansive gifts of sexuality. The church in effect says, "It is unjust for you to be turned away until you can become conformed to juiceless hetero normalcy that keeps God and you in theological shackles. Come in instead as you are, worship from the truth of who you are, and let God be liberated and revealed anew to our entire community through the authenticity of your blessed identity." Just as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo transformed the interpretation of *La Virgen María* as a result of their bold voice and thereby left power exposed as a farce, this act of ecclesiological hospitality exposes the patriarchal interpretations of scripture as empty and powerless. This is the queer genius of the gospel made

manifest within the ONA congregation that liberates Justin from his empty curiosities and into the blessings of queer community that has no need for the conditions of gender binaries or sexual categorizations for one to receive the fullness of God's justice, mercy and love.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTIONS: WE'RE ONA...NOW WHAT?

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live deep within your heart. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from panic, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain into joy. And may God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do things which others tell you cannot be done.
—Browning Ware³⁰²

Priestly Listening: What Does “ONA” Mean to the Interviewees?

I offered a series of phrases in the interviews to which I invited the interviewees to respond with their initial reactions upon hearing them. One of the phrases was, “We’re open and affirming.” What does the ONA Statement mean to LGBTQ people in our community who are not members of Friends Congregational Church? James shares his interpretation:

For me that phrase is associated with GLBT people because I have most commonly heard it and most commonly used it among the GLBT community. So, for me it is a signifier that a church body or leadership is open and affirming to the experiences of and the faith walks of GLBT people, and they are willing to minister to them without trying to fix them.³⁰³

³⁰² Browning Ware, *Diary of a Modern Pilgrim: Life Notes from One Man’s Journey* (Austin, TX: Imago Dei Publications, 2003), 60.

³⁰³ James, interview.

The tagline of James' response here has to do with ex-gay ministries, where churches will receive LGBTQ people under the condition that they enter into a process of being "fixed," or made into heterosexual individuals. These ministries foster internalized homophobia, the negative attitude that LGBTQ people have toward themselves and other queer folk, and they promote the ongoing heterosexism internalized by society in general.³⁰⁴ Given that internalized homophobia leads to an alarmingly high suicide rate among LGBTQ people, and that internalized heterosexism leads to parents disowning their LGBTQ children (An estimated 25 to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ based on conservative rates, those being conservative due to many LGBTQ youth being afraid to disclose their orientation or gender identity), this is certainly not a Christ-centered approach to ministry.³⁰⁵ On the outset, then, it is reassuring to know that a church's ONA identity is not lumped in with ex-gay ministries by perception. However, that perception interprets what the church will *not* do according to its ONA identity; it will *not* "fix" LGBTQ people. That is a passive descriptor that addresses only the first part of the ONA Statement. To be open indicates passivity; however, to be affirming suggests a proactive stance toward LGBTQ people. What does it mean, then, to be affirming? Concerning our ONA Statement, what does that indicate that we as a congregation are going to *do*?

³⁰⁴ Kundtz and Schlager, 26.

³⁰⁵ Goldman, 70.

When it comes to the ONA Statement, Patti hears this as the church being forthright and truthful: “It’s a way to say, ‘We’ve thought this through seriously and we really mean this.’”³⁰⁶ Hearing, “We’re open and affirming,” Paul responds:

I think churches that use that language have had a thoughtful approach to it; whereas ‘all are welcome here’ is more saying that we haven’t really thought about what it means and who we’re actually welcoming.³⁰⁷

It seems that Patti and Paul are underlining the question for the ONA congregation, “We’re ONA...now what?”

Does the ONA church know what it means to be ONA, and does the ONA church know who they are actually welcoming by nature of that statement? If Patti or Paul were to darken the door of an ONA church, would their feelings about the ONA Statement be confirmed or debunked? Their responses to “we’re open and affirming” sound highly complementary, as if that statement alone justifies an ONA church’s integrity. In this context, the comic lover in me has to use a Spider-Man analogy. Going back to the origin of Spider-Man and what shaped his superhero values, we find that Spider-Man’s true identity, Peter Parker, had a mentor in his Uncle Ben who warned him, “With great power comes great responsibility.” To be an ONA congregation is a powerful proclamation of God’s imperative for hospitality that includes all people and that prioritizes the marginalized. Boasting a welcome that emphasizes LGBTQ people in a community that largely marginalizes them is a

³⁰⁶ Patti, interview.

³⁰⁷ Paul, interview.

powerful thing, powerful enough to transform lives. The ONA church must treat that power with great responsibility if they hope to confirm Patti's and Paul's perceptions. That responsibility is owned by the ONA church when it is proactive in its affirmation of LGBTQ people and also consistent in that affirming posture.

Another interviewee, Thad, heard, "We're open and affirming," and his immediate feeling was, "Prove it."³⁰⁸ Although he did not expand on what he meant by that response, other interviewees did. Joan's response was:

I think it's confusing. It's like, 'Okay, what does that really mean?' You're open and affirming. Yea, you're gay. Is that as far as it goes? What are you trying to tell me when you say that? That's the idea I get from that.³⁰⁹

It sounds like we need to do something to back up our ONA Statement; we need to prove that we are, in fact, an ONA church. The proof is found in offering Thad, Joan and others who share their perceptions an explanation of what we mean when we state that we are open and affirming. To be ONA, then, means that we are proactively affirming of the very ones we are passively open to; we are extravagantly hospitable to the LGBTQ people we strive to be extravagantly welcoming toward. Essentially, Thad and Joan need to be able to walk in the door of an ONA church and see what we are trying to tell the world when we say, "We're open and affirming."

³⁰⁸ Thad, interview.

³⁰⁹ Joan, interview.

What might proof look like for Thad? What might an explanation of what we are talking about when we say that we are open and affirming look like for Joan?

Concerning hospitality toward LGBTQ people, Kundtz and Schlager write:

We need to develop social spaces or safe zones for each and every individual to be able to externalize characteristics of his or her gender identity or sexual orientation without stigma. Rather than having to choose between feelings of normality and a queer identity, a person should be seen as having the right to “mix and match” internal and external characteristics congruent with his or her own sense of self.³¹⁰

In our ONA church, are there pictures that represent the diversity of people in our congregation visibly displayed in common areas, such as the narthex, the fellowship area, or even the bathrooms? In those displays and in our church directory, do we have pictures of LGBTQ people alongside hetero people, gay and straight couples, LGBTQ and hetero individuals and families, and so forth? Are there Bible verses, mission statements, vision statements, or quotes testifying to the church’s purposeful inclusion of LGBTQ people that appear in the worship bulletin, in the worship space (banners, stained glass windows, pictures, projections, etc.), or in the church’s classroom and fellowship spaces? Are there LGBTQ-friendly pastoral care resources available, and are those resources prominently displayed? Are there LGBTQ social events, gatherings or small groups, and are they announced from the pulpit, in the worship bulletin, in the church’s newsletter and/or on the church’s website? Going back to the brainstorming and sharing of ideas that are encouraged in the free space enveloping the queer community that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter,

³¹⁰ Kundtz and Schlager, 29.

more questions could be asked to reveal the proof and explanations of the ONA church sought by Thad, Joan, and all LGBTQ people. However, perhaps the most vital question for the ONA church to constantly ask is: “Are LGBTQ people present in this congregation, and are they actively participating in the ministry of this church?”

When it comes to proof, I asked the interviewees what would be an indicator for them that a church truly was welcoming to people who are “different.” Mark responded:

I think I’d have to see their congregation, because if their congregation is made up of a broad variety of people, whether it’s race or sexual orientation or, you know, tall, short, skinny, that would allow me to see more than any sign or words would indicate. It would be like, “Do you have all of these types of people in your church?”³¹¹

Commenting on the indicators of being truly welcoming to people who are “different” as specific to Friends Church, James responded:

I know several people who attend [Friends Church] in the GLBT community on campus, and they are out here, and that to me speaks volumes. I have gay and lesbian friends who go to other churches, but they aren’t out at church. So, just knowing people who go here and seeing them being visible, that’s huge; that’s gigantic when it comes to seeing that a church is open and affirming and welcoming to people who are quote “different.” I think it’s the visibility, those people being willing to claim the church as their own is huge; willing to say, “I feel welcome here,” that’s big.³¹²

When a diversity of LGBTQ people are present and involved in the church, it serves as an assurance for other LGBTQ people visiting the church, and in many cases that

³¹¹ Mark, interview.

³¹² James, interview.

visibility provides a hospitable invitation to building relationships. Concerning her/his difficulty as a transgendered person in finding a niche in church life, Michelle commented, “Hospitality is hard to find unless you have a group to get together with.”³¹³ While we strive to become a community that celebrates diversity for the sake of becoming one in Christ, initial relationships are often sparked between like people in the congregation. In Michelle’s case, she might need to see other people who look like her or who visibly relate to her experience in order to feel secure in initiating relationships and getting more involved in the church.

Some of the interviewees interpreted “we’re open and affirming” in terms of affirming the queer community outside the walls of the church. As I noted earlier, Carlos remarked that the ONA church needs to advocate for the least of these through charitable efforts and social justice ministries to the marginalized in the community or its ONA Statement will be found wanting; it will come across as being an empty statement if the church does nothing to affirm the LGBTQ people where they are.³¹⁴ Lily understood “we’re open and affirming” similarly, saying:

Open seems to mean that we are not exclusionary. We are not going to exclude anyone based on whatever criteria [society] sets. And affirming is more like, “We support all kinds of minority groups in society.”³¹⁵

An ecclesiology of hospitality that means to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives will need to intersect with the margins and not assume that merely opening the church

³¹³ Michelle/Michael, interview.

³¹⁴ Carlos, interview.

³¹⁵ Lily, interview.

doors results in adequate, healthy evangelism. From DiNovo's pastoral standpoint of moving her ONA congregation in this direction, she shares:

Teaching us as church how to be with the marginalized, teaching us how we were marginalized, teaching the marginalized how to be with the church and also teaching the church how to become marginalized, all these were part of the economy of gift giving which is the economy of evangelism.³¹⁶

When DiNovo's congregation initially became officially ONA, the response from the community was not as immediate as she had hoped. Returning to her mantra of focusing the church's efforts on the marginalized and not church growth theory, DiNovo soon rediscovered the merits of going to the margins and meeting all of God's people where they are. Word soon got around about the intentional efforts of her congregation to reach LGBTQ people, and "queer folks," in her words, began coming to the church. When she asked one LGBTQ individual why they decided to visit the church, they said, "It's not enough to say your church is open or affirming. Before we were willing to walk in the door we wanted to see the church risk at least as much as we did by coming here."³¹⁷

Being openly LGBTQ in the world, and certainly in conservative Texas, is risky to say the least. Not until the church acknowledges and stands alongside the queer experience of these inherent risks will LGBTQ people recognize the meaning and validity of an ONA Statement, as will everyone. For hetero church members, reaching out to and forming relationships with the lived experience of LGBTQ

³¹⁶ DiNovo, 185-186.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 159.

individuals might entail being labeled “queer” by society, but this visible advocacy and solidarity in the community establishes a clear message about the ecclesiological hospitality one will find at the ONA church:

If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15, *NIV*).

Acting on these discoveries from priestly listening, the ONA congregation might ask itself where and how its household is serving the Lord by going to the margins and standing alongside the LGBTQ lived experience. How and where is the ONA church working to assure that LGBTQ people know that their congregation exists, and that it is a place of welcome for them? Is the ONA congregation involved in their local PFLAG chapter, and do they have liaisons who report news from that involvement back to the congregation? Does the church make its congregation aware of LGBTQ-friendly businesses and support those businesses? Does the congregation reach out to LGBTQ college students and youth, and how does the church create a free space for them?

A year ago I was given the opportunity to come and speak to the GLBT Resource Center’s weekly meeting of GLBT Aggies on Texas A&M Campus. The topic of my presentation was ONA churches. After presenting on what ONA means in UCC terms and Friends Church terms and how that relates to LGBTQ people, I received a few questions that asked about things like whether our church offered same-sex marriage ceremonies, and whether we are inclusive of gay youth in the

church's youth ministry. The questions that followed morphed into a communal pastoral care session where my presence as a hetero minister of an ONA church was received in two ways: 1) Students called me out on the church's mostly oppressive stance toward LGBTQ people and wanted to know clearly how I felt about that, and 2) students began sharing their own experiences that occurred either in the anti-queer church or as a result of anti-queer church doctrine, and they wanted me to inform them on how to deal with such matters. Essentially, in that short time that we had together, we developed somewhat of a sense of trust and established an open, safe space in that room; and then the conversation shifted to a few students sharing their negative church experiences, their unjust treatment at the hands of the Bible's so-called clobber passages, and then saying to me in so many words, "Teach us how to fight back" (my interpretation of their words, not their literal statements).

Even if I possessed all the hermeneutical and theological wizardry in the world, that one meeting would not give the students everything they felt that they needed from me. However, in the weeks and months that followed, students from the GLBT Aggies began trickling into Friends Church on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights for worship. Some of the students reached out to me via email or Facebook to set up appointments where they could ask me more questions about the church. Friends Church has even received some of those students into the membership of the congregation in the last year. Additionally, since that presentation on campus, Friends Church held its annual garage sale and announced that the profits would benefit the Texas A&M University GLBT Resource Center's endowment fund.

Over \$700 dollars were raised toward this effort, and the support of the garage sale itself was widespread in the community. Students and faculty from Texas A&M University who are LGBTQ folk or hetero allies of the queer community continue to visit Friends Church citing the garage sale as how they heard of our congregation or as the reason for them visiting our church.

Wrapping up each interview, I also asked the interviewees whether they had heard of Friends Church and what they had heard. These responses, I felt, would provide a limited glimpse into whether Friends Church's ONA identity is known in the community and how it is interpreted; I say 'limited' because this handful of interviewees cannot speak for all LGBTQ people in the Bryan-College Station area. Every interviewee had heard of Friends Church before and, for the most part, their knowledge of our congregation was positive; they understood Friends Church to be an inclusive, welcoming environment. However, along with that inclusion of LGBTQ people came a sense of informality. Joan explains:

You're known as the quote "gay church" in town, but what I don't understand is that while you're quote the "gay church," every gay person I know only shows up about once or twice every three months. In my circle of very spiritual people that I hang out with, even though they are like, "Yea, the gay church," and they are all excited about it, they're so noncommittal. My friend who also occasionally comes to this church, she went and got her ministry license off of the internet so that she could marry her gay friends; that was the whole point of getting it, and we were joking around in the garage one day about starting a garage church where we would just have people come over. We'd sit in the garage, we'd talk about Jesus and all that stuff, and that would be it. We already had a licensed minister, and we were like, "Oh, we can't do that! We'd take all the gays from Friends!"³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Joan, interview.

Perhaps Joan's friends view church in much the same way as a rapidly growing number of us Westerners do: Church is a fragment of our lives, but nowhere near the foundation for our lives; and church is lumped in with every other Postmodern institution that must be relevant, must make immediate sense, and must meet our intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs or we have little use for it. Maybe, but perhaps Friends Church is viewed by Joan's friends as "the gay church" that is open to LGBTQ people but not nearly affirming enough of the LGBTQ lived experience to merit their involvement beyond attending the occasional worship service. If Joan's friend, who attends Friends Church semi-frequently, feels it necessary to get ordained online in order to perform wedding ceremonies for her gay friends, what does that say about Friends Church's level of affirmation of LGBTQ relationships and our attention to discussions about sexuality in the church? Although Joan mentioned this example with a semi-playful tone, if Joan's friends are taking it upon themselves to create a space representative of church life wherein relationships are blessed and community is fostered between gay people, Friends Church would do well to question the degree to which it is affirming LGBTQ people and providing space for their spiritual growth. In this respect, John and Lance shared this testimony:

The most uplifting, positive thing I have heard of a church is watching Friends grow, and we have been here the whole time it has been growing, and seeing what a positive influence on our friends and their lives that Friends Church has had, because they needed that; especially those that were needing support in their questioning. They needed a church to go to that said, "You are okay." Maybe they had family turn against them, had their churches turn against them, or whatever, and they needed that place in their lives. They needed the structure, the building; they hadn't developed their own inner religion where

they could commune with God and not have that connection. They still needed that; they wanted that confirmation that they are a child of God, also.³¹⁹

Is Friends Church aware of the impact it is having on LGBTQ people's lives as a result of being an ONA congregation? As aforementioned in the example of recognizing an ONA Sunday, providing for public testimonies where accounts like this would be shared with the congregation is an act of hospitality emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives which unites the congregation across divisions of gender and sexual orientation. These are our stories that need to be heard, shared and celebrated in the ecclesiological sphere so that our ONA identity would be girded by a history that links the queer church with the God who loves all people. Friends Church being reminded of the power of its ONA identity through testimonies like the one shared by John and Lance would invigorate the congregation toward promoting further hospitality to LGBTQ people. This orientation of ecclesiological hospitality might send a message to Joan's friends that Friends Church does not simply wish to be open to LGBTQ people, but that Friends Church seeks to be affirming of LGBTQ spirituality and faith perspectives.

³¹⁹ John and Lance, interview.

Proactive Affirmation: What the ONA Congregation Will Not Accept

Leading up to this project's conclusive remarks, it is necessary here to expand on what is meant by the ONA church's proactive affirmation of LGBTQ people. As previously stated, it is encouraging to know that the interviewees heard the term "Open & Affirming" as an alternative from programs that are hostile toward LGBTQ people, such as ex-gay ministries. However, during the ONA church's movement from hostility to hospitality, the congregation must embrace the proactive affirmation of LGBTQ people in terms of what it will *not* accept when it comes to being a queer community rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of offering authentic hospitality to one's neighbor means standing alongside our neighbor, just as the Good Samaritan did for the beaten and bloodied victim left for dead on the road to Jericho. In other words, to be authentically hospitable toward LGBTQ people and, thereby, authentically queer as a community of faith, the ONA congregation must be clear on what it will not accept when it comes to offering an extravagant welcome to all. This is an essential component of the proactive affirmation of LGBTQ people within the ONA Statement.

I offer this example: Recently I encountered a status update on Facebook from a Texas A&M student. I had become Facebook friends with this student a few years prior in an effort to welcome him to TAMU on account of him reportedly coming

from a United Church of Christ congregation in the town from which he was matriculating (He and I discovered later that this was incorrect, and that the student had not even heard of the UCC before our conversation that I account here).³²⁰ In light of some legislation that had been introduced in the TAMU Student Senate which put funding to the university's GLBT Resource Center in jeopardy, this student posted: "I'm sorry. If you're gay and decided to come to Texas A&M of all places, you're quite dumb, to put it mildly." Being unable to let this post, made public to all of this student's Facebook friends, go unchecked, I commented in response:

This is by far the most hateful post I have seen on Facebook in ages, and certainly the most insensitive thing I've ever seen posted by an Aggie. If you want to de-friend me now, I respect that; but you need to be aware of the hurtful nature of your comment. Until posts like these disappear from Facebook, for gay students to matriculate to Texas A&M makes them not only incredibly smart, it makes them courageous.³²¹

This opened up a floodgate of comments that challenged this student on the incredulousness of his statement, and, as I noticed from some of the profile information of the people who subsequently commented, the comments were coming from LGBTQ people and/or straight allies.

³²⁰ Until two years ago, Texas A&M University released records of incoming freshmen and their denominational backgrounds to all official TAMU campus ministers in an effort to link these students with churches upon their arrival in College Station.

³²¹ Because this conversation occurred on Facebook between two then Facebook friends, this online exchange is inaccessible for purposes of footnote citation here. However, should anyone wish to view the note I composed in which I recorded this exchange in further depth, I welcome Facebook friend requests seeking to access said note at this link: http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/note.php?note_id=745779729464. Additionally, the Facebook exchange cited here occurred 25 April 2011.

Perhaps the comments and conversation that held my former Facebook friend accountable to his status post would not have appeared without my initial exposure of that post's inappropriate nature; perhaps they would have.³²² Regardless, in that moment I could not accept that post going unchecked; I could not err on the side of indifference. Likewise, the ONA church cannot afford to err on the side of indifference when it comes to similar antagonistic attitudes that might exist or passive aggressive statements that might be made within an ecclesiological atmosphere that hopes to move from hostility to hospitality.

It is *encouraging* for a church's ONA Statement to welcome an LGBTQ person into the congregation, but it is *empowering* when that welcome is followed by preaching, for example, that takes into account LGBTQ perspectives as a gesture of authentic hospitality. Incorporating the LGBTQ lived experience into messages offered from the pulpit authenticates and even heightens, I would suggest, the gospel message of reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection. However, the heteronormative outlook is one informed by conscious and subconscious indifference that might prefer allowing homiletics to remain free of mentioning LGBTQ perspectives, void of queer talk of any kind. Such talk is not *normal* in the pulpit after all. Therefore, when sermons speak directly to and through the LGBTQ lived experience, they are heard by the heteronormative mindset as more of an affront than a blessing. The resulting temptation here is one that errs on the side of indifference

³²² Of course, within hours of this exchange on Facebook, the student who posted the initial statement "defriended" me. Therefore, I can no longer view his posts, let alone comment on them.

and results in hostility; and hostility, of course, cannot be accepted in the queer community of the ONA church. Allowing such heteronormative indifference to go unchecked would be as if the ONA church were saying to the LGBTQ person responding to its ONA Statement, “It’s great that you’re here, but for you to be gay and to live in this community is still pretty dumb.”

A church member once approached me with a concern expressed by another church member; the concern being that the sermons talked too much about “the gay stuff.” Part of any minister’s vocation deals with receiving criticism, and I try to always own up to those moments when, perhaps, I do lean too heavily on one particular perspective to the detriment of another in the art of preaching. However, to refer to mention of the LGBTQ lived experience as “the gay stuff” does not stem from practical discernment; rather, it is rooted in the indifference of the heteronormative mindset that often fails to take into consideration how LGBTQ perspectives are minimized if not altogether absent from God’s story that has informed the church’s existence for centuries. Such indifference must not be accepted in the ONA church that seeks to be more proactively affirming of LGBTQ people. Speaking from the LGBTQ lived experience, Ritley writes:

A good many of our heterosexual co-religionists think of us as creating a problem by our presence. We belong to the ranks of the “tolerated,” and the classic fantasy of toleration is that the tolerated ought to be so grateful for that status that they meekly submit to whatever lingering indignities may go with it. Churches, then—with some happy exceptions—wonder why we have to be gay at all; or, if it’s really unavoidable, why we have to *talk* about it.³²³

The movement from hostility to hospitality may expand space that would purposefully include and emphasize the marginalized, but that expansion provides no further room for the heteronormative indifference that so often provides the very bases of fear; fear that stifles the gospel's powers of reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection.

Conclusion: Hospitality as Movement from Reconciliation to Celebration

Nouwen contends that hospitality is the concept that we must restore to its original depth and evocative potential if we have any hope of flanking hostility and establishing human relationships where cultural barriers typically divide us one from another.³²⁴ He speaks of hospitality in spiritual terms, and, as Johnson suggests by his self-prescribed mantra, the extent to which we show one another hospitality determines the depth of our spirituality. An ecclesiology of hospitality, therefore, is cyclical: spirituality must be nurtured to strengthen hospitality, and hospitality must be practiced to deepen spirituality. In this respect, if the church lacks hospitality, hostility creeps in and chokes off any opportunity for spiritual growth.

Without spiritual depth, the congregation is rendered incapable of appreciating one another as sacred parts of the shared body of Christ; congregants are blinded from

³²³ Countryman and Ritley, 5.

³²⁴ Nouwen, 66.

seeing each other's needs, so hospitality is disregarded as unnecessary. Commenting on this dynamic in the church, John and Lance assert:

They are doing everything wrong if they don't have hospitality. When you put in the hospitality portion you are trying to understand why people are there and what they need and how you can best get them that.³²⁵

I have argued that emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives and listening to the lived experience of LGBTQ people within the church strengthens the congregation's ONA identity, thereby reinforcing that welcome to LGBTQ people outside the church. This is, again, a cyclical dynamic wherein hospitality is placed before the welcome, proactive affirmation is authenticated before passive openness. This posturing makes for an ecclesiology of hospitality. Mark underlines in his interview:

If you're not being hospitable to each other then you're not helping each other out. The whole point of church for me is for the congregation to be there for each other, and if you can't be hospitable to each other and help each other out then what's the point? And also, if you're not hospitable then you're church doesn't grow. Nobody new is going to want to come in.³²⁶

Part of Friends Church's mission is to seek a deeper spirituality. It appears that hospitality is essential to carrying out this mission, and that growth will inevitably follow. For a church that proclaims an ONA identity, however, hospitality must emphasize LGBTQ perspectives if it is going to be true to its mission; in other words, authentic!

³²⁵ John and Lance, interview.

³²⁶ Mark, interview.

According to the interviewees, hospitality is essential to the church regardless of denominational identity, doctrinal leanings or otherwise. Joan asserts:

If you're not hospitable, then you're not being who Jesus called you to be; and if you're not going to do that right, it doesn't matter how pretty your building is, it doesn't matter how many people you have on staff, and honestly it doesn't even matter how many members you have. You're missing the boat, because that's what it's all about, point blank, period. You can talk about church all day long, but at the end of the day it's not about church; it's about being like Christ, and if your church as a whole isn't about being like Christ then you're missing it.³²⁷

If hospitality is imperative to the church, and if being Christ-like is what articulates ecclesiological hospitality, then how the ONA church interprets Christ shapes the nature of its hospitality. Looking through the lens of Jesus Christ, then, what does it mean to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives in our ecclesiological hospitality?

Jesus did not merely advocate for the marginalized in society, he befriended them, stood alongside them, accepted hospitality from them, and, above all, loved them. In his gestures of compassion toward all people from the prostitute to the Roman centurion, from the leper to the tax collector, Jesus did not infer as to what was acceptable or unacceptable, pleasing or atrocious, in the sight of God when it came to gender and sexuality. Goss writes:

There are no sayings of Jesus against same-sex relationships. Jesus inclusively accepted people; he had little to say about sexuality except for those few occasions where he condemned exploitation or double standards. If the churches spent as much time as Jesus did on sexuality, there would be a lot healthier congregations welcoming and not excluding folks based on sexual

³²⁷ Joan, interview.

orientation. Jesus' focus in his ministry was on justice, love, and inclusion. He saw hypocrisy and injustice as far greater threats to the realm of God.³²⁸

In short, when emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives, ecclesiological hospitality cannot afford to be hamstrung by what Jesus is against to the detriment of what Jesus is for.

Concerning Jesus' views on gender issues, Tanis writes:

Jesus knows that some people are born outside of the binary gender system and people whose lives lead them beyond it. He speaks of multiple ways in which someone might have become gender variant, and he does so with compassion and clarity. We are called to do likewise.³²⁹

Through the Christological lens, we discover that hospitality emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives is called to celebrate sexuality and gender. This is the affirmation of the LGBTQ lived experience that takes the bushel basket off of the lamp stand so that everyone in the church would understand Christian compassion, justice and love in ways that defy abstract hostilities. From a her LGBTQ perspective, Ritley writes:

Our sexual orientation—or rather our whole life experience, which includes our sexual orientation—has actually been the occasion of our faith coming awake and giving us life. We bring to the churches, then, a perspective that renews and revives the central message of the gospel, the good news that forms the foundation for everything that is legitimately Christian.³³⁰

Affirming LGBTQ perspectives, offering Christ-centered hospitality toward LGBTQ people, requires that the church alter oppressive narratives by first denouncing any belief that queer folk fall outside the margins of the Bible, the church, and the love of God.

³²⁸ Goss, 197.

³²⁹ Tanis, 75.

³³⁰ Countryman and Ritley, 5-6.

Recently I preached a sermon at Friends Church in which I addressed a few widely accepted falsehoods about Scripture, one of which dealt with homosexuality in the Bible. From the sermon:

Apparently, it's widely believed that the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin, and that gay and lesbian people are going to hell. Yet, the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' and 'homosexuality,' appear nowhere in the pages of Scripture. Now, one could assert that the word 'homosexual' appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9, but the word 'homosexual' is a word of our own modern invention and it bears our own cultural interpretations and unfortunate stigmas, and applying that word to the translation of that text is a tragic misfire, but that's another sermon for another day.³³¹

Even though I threw in the caveat about the word 'homosexual' being a post-antiquity translation based on inaccurate contrasts with our present culture, a congregant still approached me asserting, "Actually, the word 'homosexual' does appear in the Bible." I offered further explanation in a conversation with this congregant that Goss summarizes:

Despite claims by religious extremists, there are no biblical words that can be translated by the word "homosexual" because the concept of sexual orientation was totally absent in the ancient Mediterranean world. The Bible speaks neither about sexual orientation nor about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgendered identity. These identities are absent from the biblical worldview. The apostle Peter did not think of himself as heterosexual, and Paul did not view himself as homosexual because such concepts were alien to their thinking about sexuality in the ancient Near Eastern cultures and first-century Greco-Roman world.³³²

³³¹ Dan De Leon, "Certainty is the Opposite of Grace," sermon delivered at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 12 September 2010.

³³² Goss, 187.

Why is it so important to split these hermeneutical hairs? Because it is not enough to say that the Bible's so-called clobber passages are out of date and out of touch. In order to affirm LGBTQ perspectives, the narrative must be changed to proclaim that our heteronormative definitions of sexuality based on binaries and abstract categorization are not validated by Scripture at all; that they are, in fact, absent from Scripture. By taking homosexuality out of the discussion entirely, the biblical narrative is disrupted, stripping heterosexuality of its identity and consequent authoritative role over LGBTQ people. As Peter Gomes writes:

No credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible unless one chooses to read Scripture in a way that sustains the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals... The 'problem,' of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it.³³³

From the point of striking down any belief that LGBTQ people are outside the boundaries of God's story in Scripture and, by that understanding, outside the realm of God's love, a new, queer environment is formed where traditional roles of heterosexuality and homosexuality in binary relationship with one another are questioned. Ritley writes:

The church often gives us the impression that just by virtue of not being heterosexuals we have somehow failed the reason for our creation. This is a long-standing tradition, of course, the notion that the only reason for sexuality is the creation of children (a teaching of dubious morality in a world where dangerous overpopulation condemns a large number of those children to lives of misery).³³⁴

³³³ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow, 1996), 147, cited in Goss, 185.

³³⁴ Countryman and Ritley, 66.

Long-standing heteronormative traditions in the church are based on an aversion from all things sexual in ecclesiology. In her/his interview, Patti asserted:

There's just this real split between spirituality and religion and sexuality in this country. Especially when it comes to the church, there's this kind of split between your religious and spiritual life and your sexual life. They're different things, and we don't talk about sex in religion; we just don't deal with that.³³⁵

To engage in discussions about sexuality liberates the church into revelatory understandings about our covenantal relationship with God and our discipleship with Christ. Thad remarked in his interview

Churches need to be questioning. If they get too comfortable and set in one specific track, then it gets old and dull; and then it starts to degrade. The questioning helps you see if you're actually doing things for the right reasons, if you actually believe the right things.³³⁶

If all that we believe about sexuality is based on binary interpretations that push LGBTQ people to the margins, then sexuality must be questioned, reengaged and reinterpreted by the ONA church's queer community. For example, Ritley's co-author, William Countryman, offers this queer perspective:

To be procreative for humanity means not simply bearing children; it means raising up a new generation, and that's a bigger and much more complex thing. It requires a lot more roles than simply father and mother.³³⁷

Yes, a lot more roles, a lot more creativity, and a lot more gifts uplifted by the ONA congregation that intentionally celebrates sexuality. Practicing a theology that

³³⁵ Patti, interview.

³³⁶ Thad, interview.

³³⁷ Countryman and Ritley, 79.

includes all of God's people and their unmistakable gender identities and sexual orientations, this exemplifies an ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, and that glorifies God from the diverse abundance of the queer community.

More than anything, what is needed for the ONA church's hospitality to be authentic in emphasizing the lived experience of LGBTQ people is for gender and sexuality to be valued and honored. Applying Nouwen's spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality to its own ecclesiology, the ONA church proclaims a movement away from LGBTQ people's gender identity and sexual orientations being reconciled to God and toward those sacred gifts being celebrated and loved by God.

In their interview, John and Lance shared:

We have been on panels before; back in the eighties and nineties we were on them a lot on campus. And one of the most common things that was asked was, "Are you a Christian?" And I would answer, "Yes, I am." Then they would ask "How do you reconcile all that?" And I would say, "Okay, when I find that people pick and choose what they want to believe in [the Bible], then my feeling is that whenever you stop eating shellfish, when you stop promoting football, when you stop doing all those things that you have decided are okay for you to do, then you can tell me what is all right to do."³³⁸

Bearing John's and Lance's and the other interviewees' perspectives in mind, when it comes to authenticating hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, it is not enough for the church to be open and accepting of LGBTQ people. It is not enough for the church to hold an ONA Statement at arm's length by treating LGBTQ people with hospitality that views them as abstractions that fit into a heteronormative

³³⁸ John and Lance, interview.

framework. It is not enough for the ONA church to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies, but to not be open to discussions about LGBTQ interpretations of marriage, not to mention queer interpretations of covenant, relationships, life-planning and envisioning the future. It is not enough for the ONA church to take joy in its own ONA Statement while the surrounding community looks on with a shrug and assumes, “How kind of them to take in LGBTQ people despite their abominable flaws.” Essentially, it is not enough for the ONA church to rest on being open to LGBTQ people while remaining indifferently silent about affirming the fullness of their being. True hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives must proclaim to the world that God celebrates our various gender identities and sexual orientations, that God loves all of who we are, and that the lived experience of LGBTQ people is vital to the body of Christ.

AFTERWORD:

ACCEPTING THE JOY AND THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Initially, I chose the topic for this study because of the peculiarity of my ministerial setting. If the Doctor of Ministry project for Brite Divinity School needed to at least attempt to benefit the area of my present service to ministry, then I thought, “The fact that our congregation is an ONA flock in conservative Texas puts a unique spin on what I might research.” Furthermore, I remain fascinated with different walks of life coming together and being in community despite their disagreements over anything from theology, Christology and worship liturgy to politics, family and the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Throw on top of those differences the diversity of a queer community that is “gifted by otherness,” as Countryman and Ritley coin in their book’s title, and this study practically demanded that I focus on the challenges, blessings and growth that come from being the unmistakable ONA community of faith that we are at 2200 Southwood Drive in College Station, Texas.

This approach, however, blithely rested on the novelty of what brought this community together and did not address what I felt was a more pressing topic: “Where do we go from here?” If the ONA Statement is what led to, in large part, the culmination of the particular community that we are at Friends Congregational

Church, are we being good stewards of these beautiful consequences, are we caring for one another in ways that thank God for the blessings of being a queer community, and, given the bold nature of the ONA identity, are we engaging in hospitality toward one another that emphasizes LGBTQ concerns?

Mostly, during the last five-plus years during which I have served the pastorate of Friends Congregational Church, the only times our congregation has had conversations about the particularities of the LGBTQ lived experience have occurred as a result of something painful happening in our community. Specifically, we have only really talked about LGBTQ perspectives when there has been a breakup between two LGBTQ persons in our congregation, and those conversations have been delicate and incomplete at best, and certainly reactionary. This troubles me. This is passive, not proactive. This exposes a church family that is open to diversity, but not affirming of the realities of that diversity. Not knowing enough about LGBTQ people's lives within a community that is supposed to be supportive of one another in good times and bad causes our better angels to flutter away when the going gets tough.

In February of 2007, a professional basketball player, Tim Hardaway, former Miami Heat guard, went on Miami sports radio station WAXY-AM and said that he hated gay people: "You know, I hate gay people, so I let it be known. I don't like to be around gay people. I am homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States."³³⁹ Hardaway's comments, for which he later apologized, came

³³⁹ Accessed from <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2766213>, 24 February 2011.

in response to the news that another former NBA player, John Amaechi, had publicly come out, becoming the first professional basketball player to openly identify himself as gay.³⁴⁰ What was more disturbing to Amaechi than Hardaway's hostile comments, however, was the absence of his former teammates and NBA peers in the days following his coming out and Hardaway's subsequent radio rant. An excerpt from a *Miami Herald* article, February 15, 2007:

John Amaechi said he had not heard from any former teammates or NBA players, only from one of his coaches. He challenges "professional male athletes to be active supporters, and that doesn't mean putting a rainbow decal on their car. It means letting other guys in the locker room know that it's not OK to make gay jokes, that it's hurtful, and that it's not OK to be homophobic. But it's hard to get straight guys to step up. When men stood by women during the suffrage movement they were called progressive and bold. When whites stood by blacks, they were heroes. But a straight guy standing up for a gay guy faces discrimination, and that's a big part of the battle we're fighting."³⁴¹

For our LGBTQ siblings in the ONA church, their lived experience is often a battle fought against the grain of heteronormative society. In addition to the weight of being out, it is a battle for LGBTQ people to establish relationships, to raise children, to find a church home, to fulfill vocational dreams, to be accepted by their families, to build their own families, and, in Amaechi's case, to maintain trustworthy friendships. The call to the hetero communities within all ONA churches is to be more than

³⁴⁰ Accessed from <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2757105>, 24 February 2011.

³⁴¹ M. Kaufman, "Hardaway Makes Anti-Gay Comments on Radio," *MiamiHerald.com*, cited in Goldman, accessed 15 February 2007 from <http://www.miamiherald.com/mld/miamiherald/news/16700045.htm>, 62.

passively open to LGBTQ people, but to also proactively affirm LGBTQ people by recognizing and appreciating their battles and embracing those battles as our own; for if one part of the body of Christ suffers, every part suffers with it, and if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Nouwen writes:

We are not called to respond to generalities but to the concrete facts with which we are confronted day after day. A compassionate man can no longer look at these manifestations of evil and death as disturbing interruptions of his life plan but rather has to confront them as an opportunity for the conversion of himself and his fellow human beings. Every time in history that men and women have been able to respond to the events of their world as an occasion to change their hearts, an exhaustible source of generosity and new life has been opened, offering hope far beyond the limits of human prediction.³⁴²

Hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, then, is not limited to LGBTQ people in the extent of its transformative power and the depth of its spiritual growth. When the ONA congregation embraces its shared queerness, then everyone receives the God-given gifts of hospitality. As Oden writes:

On the one hand, the host has resources. On the other hand, the host identifies with the stranger/guest and chooses not to live out of any privilege those resources offer, but rather to understand himself or herself as a recipient, too.³⁴³

This gets back to Amaechi's comment about a hetero person standing up for an LGBTQ person facing discrimination for doing so. This is a part of my experience as a hetero male pastor of a Christian church. However, we straight folk in our ONA United Church of Christ congregations must be reminded of the UCC's "Statement of

³⁴² Nouwen, 37.

³⁴³ Oden, 26.

Faith,” where we vow “to accept the joy and the cost of discipleship.”³⁴⁴ Kundtz and Schlager point out:

If you are non-LGBTQ, your pro-LGBTQ comments tend to make many other non-LGBTQ people stop and think. These are people who might otherwise dismiss the remark of any queer person as a self-serving example of the “gay agenda.”³⁴⁵

Hetero people, or non-LGBTQ persons as Kundtz and Schlager term it, need to be reminded of this powerful joy in our discipleship to Christ. Hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives requires that non-LGBTQ persons be visibly and vocally supportive of LGBTQ lived experiences in good times and bad; engaging in transformative, spiritually rich discussions about sexuality, gender identity, relationships, and our interpretation of God as we are made in God’s image. When hetero persons learn more about LGBTQ experiences and realities, we bear a stronger witness to other non-LGBTQ people who are perhaps at their core only hostile toward queerness out of a genuine lack of perspective. This is the joy of discipleship that we receive from engaging in hospitality that affirms LGBTQ perspectives.

But Amaechi is right: The cost of this discipleship is real, as well. Being the pastor of Friends Congregational Church, I have faced ostracism from some of my ministerial peers in our local community on account of our congregation’s ONA identity. When I spoke out on the radio in nearby Navasota, where I offer quarterly

³⁴⁴ Margaret Rowland Post, *History and Program: Revised and Updated* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2007), 9.

³⁴⁵ Kundtz and Schlager, 50.

audio devotionals, advocating for the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in all churches, the radio station received letters from other area pastors criticizing my comments and asking that I be removed from the radio's rotation. I have received anonymous emails at the church antagonizing my stance in support of LGBTQ people, saying that my advocacy in this respect is a worse offense to God than being gay. Some of my hetero friends have drawn lines in the sand which I am now forbidden to cross on account of being a pro-LGBTQ Christian pastor. I have even had tense discussions with some dear friends and family members where it is clear that my views on matters such as same-sex marriage and children being raised by same-sex couples are not appreciated. Most pastors will disclose that being a minister is often a lonely gig, and my pastoral existence in this capacity makes it all the lonelier. However, even in these apparent costs of standing alongside LGBTQ people I find God's transcendent joy.

My congregation granted me a month away from the pastorate to write the initial draft of this doctoral study, during which time I attended worship services at different churches in our community. One of the churches I attended was a Pentecostal church that was highly charismatic and evangelistic. The people were extremely welcoming toward me, nearly half of the congregation of roughly 100 people making it a point to shake my hand and let me know how glad they were that I was present with them in worship. With the band playing, the choir singing and the spirit-filled tongues speaking, I thought to myself, "I wonder if I'm going to hear any anti-gay sentiment from the pulpit this morning." I had pondered the same question in other worship settings before, but for some reason, this morning I was asking that

question from the depth of my being, as if to think that if something hostile were said, it would be hostile toward me.

Sure enough, it happened. The preacher, elaborating on a laundry list of “demons” that tempt the human soul, listed homosexuality as one of those demons (alongside debauchery, adultery, stealing, cursing and smoking cigarettes). The moment he spoke the term “homosexual demon,” I winced; and then a chill ran up my spine, and then I felt sick, and then I felt afraid, and then I felt angry, and then I wondered, “Do I walk out now or wait until he’s done preaching?” The experience may have been terrible, but at the same time I felt a blessing. Hearing that statement voiced from the pulpit against homosexuality as being hurled directly at me, and sensing the horrible discomfort in my instinctive response, I felt the oneness I share with my LGBTQ siblings strengthened; and in that oneness I was blessed that morning. In a little sanctuary just miles away from my ONA church peers, I felt the cost of worldly persecution alongside the joy of God’s blessing. Such is grace.

I have certainly not experienced the extent of discrimination that has been hurled at other non-LGBTQ allies, nor do I exemplify a life that is doing all that it can in advocacy and companionship with LGBTQ people. Still, I try. And so long as Friends Congregational Church and other ONA churches raise the banner of an ONA Statement, we must try. We must accept the joy as well as the cost of discipleship, following Christ who goes to the margins in inclusion and love of all people, and we must never grow weary in doing what is good for the sake of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives. Should the weight of prophetically bearing witness

to the queer experience that transcends cultural hostility find us facing confrontational hatred, discrimination, and societal ostracism, let us take hope in Jesus' words that extend far beyond human predictions:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.³⁴⁶

Amen.

³⁴⁶ Matthew 5:11-12, *NIV*.

APPENDIX: SERMONS

The following is a sermon for Friends Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, College Station, Texas, titled, "What Makes a Christian: Moving from Hostility to Hospitality," delivered by Reverend Dan De Leon on the Second Sunday of Lent, March 20, 2011, based on the lectionary texts of Genesis 12:1-4a, and Romans 4:1-5; 13-17.³⁴⁷

In his letter to the Romans, Paul mentions Abraham. Abraham was the father of many nations. Abraham was blessed and he was a blessing, and Paul utilizes Abraham's story to make a point in his letter about what justifies someone to God. We hear that passage from Romans as a lesson on what it takes to be Christian, what makes a Christian.

We talked about that passage Wednesday night in this place, and we licked away the layers of that theological Tootsie Roll Pop trying to get to the revelatory center. Do good works make a Christian? Does great faith make a Christian? Tough questions. But instead of attacking those questions from our own encounters with dogma and doctrine and street corner evangelism and theologies of salvation, we instead looked at our own spiritual paths. We looked at our own faith journeys and recalled that person or those people who we viewed as being the most Christian people we'd ever encountered, and we reflected on what made them so, what made them Christian.

We shared our recollections of childhood friends and Sunday school teachers and family members and co-workers. Each of these people revealed to us in different ways what makes a Christian. These good people were observant, recognizing others' needs and striving to meet those needs or at least to make it apparent that they cared. These people were set aside, marching to the beat of their own drummer, no matter what others may have thought of them. These people prioritized their faith. They allowed their faith in God to transcend even their own philosophical or political opinions; they demonstrated the power of righteousness over self-righteousness. These people were selfless, devoting their lives to serving others, and then, when the time came, graciously handing those responsibilities of servanthood over to other anxious leaders. Do you know anyone like that? As you think of individuals like that in your life, perhaps they are at least a part of the reason for you being here in this house of worship this morning.

What all of these good people hold in common, all of these souls that help us understand what it means to be Christian, is that they are blessed and they are a

³⁴⁷ The audio podcast of this sermon can be accessed at http://www.friends-ucc.org/wordpress/?page_id=11.

blessing. Like Paul's mention of Abraham in the Romans passage, they are blessed and they are a blessing. And what that means is that the blessings that they give to others—the blessings they give to you and me—are actions that expand the space surrounding our lives in which we come to know God. The people in our lives that we think of as being the most Christian people we know bless us by expanding the space around our lives, little by little, in which we come to know God. It's a liberating act, this blessing. It serves to break any yoke of slavery that keeps us from a relationship with the Holy. And isn't that at the very center of the Tootsie Roll Pop of Christianity; a religion that is founded on a Savior who came to set the captives free?

There are elements of our faith history that stand to the contrary though. Our forebears in the wilderness were more about constricting and territorializing space than about expanding it. Johannes Pedersen wrote a book in the early 20th century called *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, and he says this: "For the Israelite it is a matter of course that common flesh makes common character. Therefore family, *mishpāhā*, is the designation of those who are of the same kind, have the same essential features."³⁴⁸

We revere Father Abraham in our faith, but just like even our most beloved family members have their flaws, the family before us, the nations of Abraham, had its flaws. Just like so many churches that stereotypically fear change, many of those ancient Israelites did not want God to love and take care of anyone but them, and they wanted it to stay that way. They did not want a God of impartial Holiness; they did not want a God that was impartial to everyone, they just wanted a God that would be partial to them.³⁴⁹ Remember that the Israelites were out to destroy all the non-Israelite people of Palestine, anyone outside the family who were not like them. Deuteronomy 7:2: "...and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy."

Wow. This doesn't sound very Christian, does it? It certainly doesn't sound like the people our Wednesday night group described as being the most Christian-like folk they'd ever known; but fortunately, for the ancient Israelites and for us, the story changes. The concept of Holiness shifts. As God continues to speak through the prophets about the expansiveness of God's justice and mercy and love, the Israelites gradually move away from nationalism and toward universalism. They realize that their identity of being blessed requires that they be a blessing to others, even if those others don't look like them or act like them or come from the same country as they do. Isaiah 2:3: "*Many* peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his

³⁴⁸ Walter Russell Bowie, "Genesis: Exposition: Nationalism and the Larger Outlook," ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 575.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

ways and that we may walk in his paths.’” This is a movement from hostility to hospitality.

Let me tell you what I mean: There’s a Catholic theologian named Henri Nouwen. We’ve shared some of his Lenten devotionals here at Friends Church in the past, and we even have some copies of his book about the spirituality of fundraising as a means of providing some guidance for our current “Friends in Faith” capital campaign. Nouwen was a prolific writer. One of the books he wrote was called *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, and there is a section in it describing the spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality.³⁵⁰ What does this look like and why is it so important for us?

Hostility is what makes competition more fierce than fun. Hostility is what fans the flames of greed until everyone burns. Hostility is what ratchets up tribalism and territorialism to the point that we may know proudly where we stand but we have lost all touch with what we stand for. Hostility is what guides the hand that wrote the letter that appeared in *The Eagle* on Friday, talking about undocumented immigrants.³⁵¹ The letter said, “These illegals have paid nothing, but they, along with many others, are here with their hands out and living off of us. We have to build more schools, hire more teachers and buy more buses when they dump their kids in our schools—not just one or two or three, but six, eight or ten.”³⁵² Hostility, of course, is what fuels racism. Hostility is what causes the American psyche to go on a witch hunt for Muslims. Hostility was at the core of the ancient Israelites’ desire for God to be partial to them alone. All of this doesn’t sound very Christian, does it?

Back to Nouwen here: Nouwen suggests that we move away from this hostility and toward hospitality, because hospitality is at the very heart of Christianity. So, does that mean that we fight hostility with hospitality? Are we supposed to proudly combat and exterminate hostility with hospitality? No, because to fight hostility with anything is a hostile gesture in and of itself. It’s like Martin Luther King says, “You can’t drive out hate with hate. Only love can do that.”³⁵³ What Nouwen suggests in his spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality is that hospitality surrounds hostility, hospitality envelopes hostility, and expands the space around it until that space is so vast and open and free that hostility has no more power.

³⁵⁰ Nouwen, 43-80.

³⁵¹ *The Eagle* is the local newspaper for the Bryan-College Station area.

³⁵² Accessed at <http://www.theeagle.com/letters/Letters-for-March-172011-03-16T22-00-30> on 19 March 2011.

³⁵³ Doreen Rappaport, *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2001), N/A.

Now, make no mistake: hostility pulsates throughout the texts of our Bible because those texts were written by patriarchal storytellers in a heterosexist, hyper-masculine time and culture; and hostility is what hangs onto that purview and that context to the detriment of the message itself and to the detriment of all of God's children. What then are we to say about the authority of this ancient text that serves to guide our faith? Well, this is where hospitality comes in. Hospitality behaves as Jesus when it comes to the Bible. Hospitality breathes new life into this authority that we call the Word of God as Jesus breathed new life into the Law and the Prophets before him. It's a liberating act; a blessing.

Hospitality proclaims that everyone has a God-given place in the pages of Scripture. Hospitality sees to it that everyone has a place in the still-speaking story of God and God's people. Hospitality points out that everyone has a gift to give, a light to shine, just like Abraham and Sarah and Ester and Ruth and David and Jonathan and Rahab and Rispah and the prophets and the disciples and Paul and Timothy and Jesus of Nazareth, the light of the world who came to set the captives free. Hospitality expands the space that is already filled with God's love until every yoke of slavery in this world is broken; every yoke of slavery that says that some are in and some are out when it comes to the Word of God is broken; everyone is set free *by* the Word and God and set free *into* the Word of God.

Here's how Nouwen describes it:

Hospitality...means...the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment...It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way.³⁵⁴

I saw news footage of a rally in DC a few weeks back where Christians had gathered to make their voices heard in opposition to civil rights for Muslims. Signs opposed to Islam were held high, American flags waved and the people yelled. It was a hostile crowd. But in the midst of the rage, right there in the middle of everyone, a Muslim man laid a mat on the ground. He got on his knees, put his face to the ground, and prayed. On occasion he sat upright looking toward the sky before returning his face to the ground. And the whole time that this man is praying, reverently, peacefully, in his own way, the people around him are chanting louder and louder, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Someone standing next to the man even had a sign that he pushed into his face that read, "Jesus loves you." To move from hostility to hospitality would require this rally of Christians to stop constricting the space around

³⁵⁴ Nouwen, 49.

the Muslim man and instead expand the space around him, just as Jesus expanded the space around the woman that the scribes and Pharisees brought to the Temple to be stoned to death on account of her alleged sexual infractions when he said to them, “Whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone.”³⁵⁵ Moving from hostility to hospitality would be for the rally of Christians to take a page from their forebears who moved away from a partial God of territory and toward an impartial God of Holiness. Moving from hostility to hospitality would be for this rally of Christians to acknowledge that they are blessed, not privileged but blessed, and therefore required to be a blessing, to be as Christ to the stranger in their midst. That is what makes a Christian.

Friends Congregational Church, our denomination proclaims that we are a united and uniting church. Like Abraham, we are blessed and required to be a blessing. God has created the expanse of Creation, and we are required to continue expanding it, not to draw pious lines around it. If we have been blessed, as the psalmist writes in Psalm 23, and our cups truly do runneth over, then we are called to provide more cups until everyone receives the blessings of God’s justice and mercy and love. Amen.

³⁵⁵ John 8:7.

The following is a sermon for Friends Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, College Station, Texas, titled, "Divine Disruptions: A Sermon Using Queer Biblical Criticism," delivered by Reverend Dan De Leon on the Third Sunday of Lent, March 27, 2011, based on the lectionary text of Exodus 17:1-7, and an additional text not in the day's lectionary: Luke 7:36-50.³⁵⁶

I used to work in bars. I started out as a bar back when I was nineteen: washing glasses, filling the wells with ice, restocking everything. Eventually I became a bartender. But no matter what your position was in the bar—tender, wait staff, bouncer, bar back—when the clock struck 2am, every employee's top priority was getting folks out of the bar. We did this by waving our arms in the air and saying out loud, over and over again, "You don't have to go home, you just have to leave!" Now, in retrospect, I wonder, "Where did they go?"

We might giggle and smirk about the answer to that question using our most wickedly playful creativity; but apply that question to the woman in Simon the Pharisee's home and things aren't so funny anymore. The last words that we hear, the last thing that's said in this story comes from Jesus when he says to the woman, "Go in peace." Well, where does she go? All that we know about this nameless woman is that she lives somewhere in the city and that she is a sinner. That's all we know. And we have Simon the Pharisee to thank for that. Simon thinks, "If this guy Jesus was all that he's cracked up to be, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." That's all we know about the woman. So, when Jesus says, "Go in peace," who knows? Maybe Jesus is left standing there contemplating the compassionate, thoughtful question, "Where will she go now?" But before that question has the chance to take root and challenge anything about the institutional power structure that pushed this woman to the margins in the first place, Simon steps in and says, "That's right! You heard him! Get out of here! Go back to where you came from, wherever that is! You don't have to go home, you just have to leave!"

Brock Savelkoul served the U.S. military for three tours in Iraq.³⁵⁷ His family and friends described him as being an all-around kind of guy. That was altered in January of 2009 when a rocket exploded near the trailer in Baghdad where Brock and a few other servicemen were staying. Brock was diagnosed with a mild traumatic brain injury and he went to Thailand for some R&R. From there he made erratic

³⁵⁶ The audio podcast of this sermon can be accessed at <http://www.friends-ucc.org/wordpress/?m=20110327>.

³⁵⁷ Initially aired on NPR's "All Things Considered" 22 March 2011, and accessed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=134657905>, 25 March 2011.

phone calls to his family where he sounded out of touch with reality and paranoid about a phantom enemy coming to get him. After that, the army transferred Brock back to the U.S. where he was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. He would spend a year in and out of treatment for it, but when he didn't get better, the army discharged him; in effect saying, "You don't have to go home, you just have to leave."

The story comes to a head after that when Brock smashes his Purple Heart display case and steals all of his dad's guns, along with an assault rifle. He gets in his Tacoma pickup and leads the cops on a high speed chase on the highways and back roads of North Dakota. He runs out of gas and gets out of his truck, gun in hand, and the standoff continues. Brock was exhibiting a phenomenon called suicide by cop, where someone cannot bring themselves to take their own life, so they provoke the police to do it for them. The standoff ends with Brock being taised to the ground, arrested and charged with three felonies.

Do you know a Brock Savelkoul? If you do, what do you know about him? Typically, all we know is where he's been. That's all we really know, and it's because of Simon the Pharisee and his elite group of insiders always halting our awareness right there when they say, "Oh, that woman? We know where she's been. And if you know where she's been, you won't let her anywhere near you!" Oh, Brock? Oh, that guy? We know where he's been. He's just a big mess. Don't let him anywhere near you!

The hospitable heart must ask where Brock goes and where the woman goes, because the Scriptures reveal to us that hospitality is emphatically extended to the stranger, no matter where they've been; and that hospitality is extended in anticipation of a blessing from the Divine, a blessing from God. Do you see how Simon's hostile approach cuts God's blessings short? Do you see how hostility cuts Brock's life story and what he might bless the world with short? Do you see how resting on the judgments of where someone has been keeps the justice and mercy and righteousness and love of God held captive?

In Georgia the legislature is considering Immigration Bills that target undocumented immigrants. The legislation would require employers to use a federal database to check the immigration status of new hires, and it would authorize law-enforcement officers to check the immigration status of suspects who can't produce an accepted form of identification.³⁵⁸ Okay. Where will they go?

In Texas, our state budget threatens to dramatically slash funding for education; slashing classrooms and teachers and children. One might argue how this makes fiscal sense. Fine, but when it comes to the exodus of schools and teachers and children and the dreams that are their purpose to foster, where will they go?

³⁵⁸ Accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2011/03/24/us/AP-US-Georgia-Immigration-Rally.html?_r=3&hp 25 March 2011.

And when it comes to the rising number of women and men serving in American's armed forces coming home with brain injuries, and physical limitations and PTSD, while our attention remains focused on the escalation of war for "insert political reason," where will those servicewomen and servicemen go? Where will they go?

Brock Savelkoul had to go on a high speed police chase and get out of his truck with a gun in his hand to have a standoff with law enforcement in order to get our attention and force us to ask that question: "Where will they go?" And the nameless woman who kissed Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her tears forces her way into Simon's home and into this story so that she might get our attention, too.

Well, what is she saying? It's hard to tell really. All that we know about her is what Simon the Pharisee allows us to know about her: that she's a sinner, that she lives in the city, and that she's not welcome in Simon's home. We want to know more, so we apply queer biblical criticism here, because a queer reading disrupts the story; it disrupts the text just like the nameless woman disrupts Simon's home.

Simon views the woman abstractly. He views her as a type of person fitting into a particular category, not as a person. Her supposed identity of "sinner" makes Simon and his guests "saved." But Simon and his company need this woman in order to assert their own identity, to know who they are, because normal needs an abnormal to know itself. This experience, this identity heaped on the nameless woman, is the bondage that she lives with everyday. It's the yoke of slavery that she endures every day of her life. This is why the scholars who came up with it call it queer biblical criticism, because queer reading is rooted in the LGBTQ experience.

As many of us in this room know far too well, every day gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people live under a yoke of slavery that says, "Oh, we know who they are. And from our abstract stereotypes and our vantage point of normalcy, we know where they've been." This is a culturally imposed experience that enslaves LGBTQ people with constantly having to choose how far out of the closet they will live today and tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that.

Think of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. They've been delivered from slavery, or so it would appear. They can't find water in the desert and their livestock is dying, so they complain to Moses and say, "We're never going to really be free, because this existence is no better than life back in Egypt. Let's just cut our losses and go back to the slavery that we came from." But the woman in Luke's gospel, she won't settle. She recognizes the culturally imposed slavery that has pushed her to the margins. The woman recognizes the farce of Simon's power that hides behind androcentric patriarchy and heterosexist masculinity. She sees the false power that fuels Simon's hostility and she says, "Enough!" She forces herself into his home, into this story and into our hearts, like a stick striking a rock and causing water to explode into the desert. She exposes false power and reveals the justice and mercy and righteousness and love of God, which causes Jesus to point to her and say, "Wow! Do you see this woman?"

Perhaps now, during the Season of Lent, more than any other time in the Christian year we proclaim Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God. And this ultimate revelation of God points to a nameless woman that has been brushed off by a hostile culture that says, "Oh, we know where she's been," and Christ says, "Do you see this woman? She is light for the world! She has come into this home and into the story of God to remove the bushel basket and let God's light of justice and mercy and righteousness and love fill the whole house, the whole world, so that no one would be cast off into the wilderness, so that everyone would be acknowledged and appreciated and revered, and so that everyone would be set free by this blessing from God, this Divine disruption."

I want to tell you about James. James was a Divine disruption. James was homeless, living somewhere in the city, like the woman in Luke's gospel, and he forced his way into our hearts and minds at First Baptist Church of Austin. Every Sunday morning, James would wander in from who-knows-where with his frazzled red hair and wide eyes and tattered clothes. Every Sunday morning he stood right outside the sanctuary where everyone could see him, leaning against the staircase with a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand. Every Sunday morning he cornered you, no matter how old or young you were. I was only a teenager when James stopped me in my tracks for a conversation that lasted a thousand years. He was in my parents' Sunday School Class, and he made those classes awkward every week when he asked for prayers for his diarrhea. Crazy old homeless James. We were kind enough to let him in because it was the Christian thing to do, but most of us held him at arm's length with Simon the Pharisee's kind of hospitality because, "Hey, we know where James has been." And every Sunday when the worship service was over and the preacher said, "Go in peace," we seldom brought ourselves to ask the question, "Where does James go?"

I learned that James found housing in an apartment somewhere with no working AC. One summer when the sun was unforgiving, it got so hot that James died of heat exhaustion right there in his home. We had a memorial service for James at the church. James didn't have any survivors, no family to speak of, so we put a microphone at the front of the sanctuary and the pastor asked for members of the congregation to come forward and share a memory about James. I sat in the balcony and watched people, one by one, come up to the microphone and share their memories of James. The testimonies were joyful and interesting and awkward, just like James was, but they also harbored a communal feeling of accountability. James had disrupted our sense of normalcy, and nothing would ever be normal anymore. The testimonies served as somewhat of a call to justice and mercy and righteousness and love.

I served another church in the city a few years later, and we held a Vacation Bible School for children one summer when it was exceedingly hot. The church wanted to teach the children about Jesus' command to love your neighbor, and we focused that lesson on folks like James who were suffering under the unforgiving summer heat. Every morning of those five days of VBS the children brought offerings

that we took up in the kick-off worship service, and while the kids were off playing games and learning Bible stories and doing arts and crafts, adult volunteers would take the offering and get as many 20-inch box fans as that money could buy. They would then take those fans and stack them in the sanctuary along the wall so that the next morning when the children gathered for the kickoff worship service they would see the fruits of their labor. That excitement grew, and every morning the kids would bring more and more money for the offering, and the adults would buy more and more fans and stack them along the wall so that by Friday morning the wall of box fans were kissing the ceiling, kissing the ceiling with justice and mercy and righteousness and love. I think James would have liked to see that.

The greatest lesson that we learn today doesn't come from the Israelites. It doesn't come from Moses, and it only indirectly comes from Jesus. The greatest lesson we learn is from the nameless woman who would not settle for a lackluster existence in the hostile wilderness of patriarchal interpretation. By forcing her way into God's story, she disrupts normalcy and replaces abstract judgment with concrete blessings, and Jesus, the light of the world, points to this Divine disruption and says to us, "Do you see this woman?" And then Jesus tells us, "Go in peace."

Do you wonder where Brock Savelkoul went? After his arrest and trial, his story was picked up by a veterans advocate at the governor's office. Late last year, the state freed Brock on bail and sent him to an inpatient program at the VA. He's finished more than two months of intensive treatment. He's 29 years old. He's going to counseling at the VA. He's checking out colleges. And he's adopted a dog, a dachshund mix, and he named the dog lucky. Do you see this man?

For James and Brock and for the woman so enslaved by patriarchal interpretation that the writer of Luke's Gospel would not even give her a name, for these and so many Divine disruptions that God sends us to change our hearts and minds so that this world would be transformed one act of love at a time, thanks be to God. Amen.

The following is a sermon for First Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, titled, "Who Made Me a Divider?," delivered by Reverend Dan De Leon on August 1, 2010, based on the lectionary text of Luke 12:13-21. The sermon attempts to remind FBC's congregation of the importance of priestly listening in the cyclical exercise of practical theology that emphasizes the perspectives of those outside the walls of the church.

I served the youth ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church for six years before moving to Bryan.³⁵⁹ During those six years, I constantly had to clarify who Highland Park Baptist Church was. People would ask me, "So, what do you do?" I'd tell them, "I'm a youth minister."

"Oh! Which church?"

"Highland Park Baptist Church."

"Oh! I know that church. That's the one over there on Speedway, right?"

"No. That's Hyde Park Baptist."

And then I'd have to go into detail about where Highland Park was located and the differences between Hyde Park and Highland Park theologically and otherwise. By the end of the conversation, the person is wishing they'd asked me about football or something.

So, when the call came for me to be the pastor of a different church, I thought, "Praise God! Never again will I have to spend time clarifying for other people exactly who our church is." I mean who would have a problem understanding exactly who Friends Congregational Church, UCC, is, right? That's clear enough.

"So, what do you do?"

"I'm a pastor."

"What church?"

"Friends Congregational Church."

"Oh! Is that Quaker?"

"No, it's a UCC church."

"UCC... what's that?"

"United Church of Christ."

"Oh, yeah. My cousin grew up Church of Christ. So, you guys don't have instruments in there or anything right?"

"Yes, we have instruments. We're not Church of Christ; we're United Church of Christ."

"What's United Church of Christ?"

³⁵⁹ Highland Park Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, was formed in 1952 as a mission of First Baptist Church, Austin, Texas.

And then I launch into this ecclesial jargon where I explain that the Congregational Church and the Christian Church and the Evangelical Church and the Reformed Church scattered all over the country from their Mayflower roots and set up congregations all over the place, and how those four denominations came together in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ. Why oh why, if the Church of Christ was formed in the early nineteenth century, and then, well over 100 years later, those other four denominations came together to form one new denomination, given all that hindsight, why they couldn't come up with a name more creative and distinguishable than the United Church of Christ, thereby making life difficult for UCC pastors like myself, I don't know! And that's the end of that conversation.

Life constantly places us in situations where we need to clarify our identity. It's important for others to know who we are, but it can be so tempting to just keep quiet. It takes so much work to get people to understand you. Why bother?

This is how I feel when I'm driving down Wellborn Road parallel to the train and I have to stop at a light next to the Death Star, Kyle Field, and I look up at all the gas-guzzling trucks surrounding my magical little hybrid car (those hybrid cars are magical, you know), and I see myriad bumper stickers that decry everything I hold dear, and I think, "If they knew who I was and what I was thinking, they might pull me out of this car and tie me to the tracks."³⁶⁰ Best to just keep quiet, thank you very much. No sense in trying to clarify who I am.

That certainly would be safer. That certainly would be easier. But then I run the risk of becoming the farmer in Jesus' parable. Here is a guy who is guilty of nothing but consistent, conservative farming. He has taken advantage of good soil, good rain and good sun, and now he has far more crops than his barns will hold. It appears that this man has done nothing wrong; nothing malicious, like the workers in the vineyard who murder the vineyard owner's son; nothing short-sighted, like the servant who buried his talent for safekeeping; nothing wasteful, like the Prodigal Son. So, why does God call this man a fool? What is the tragedy in his actions?

Jesus doesn't mention any other person but the farmer in this illustration, but like most of Jesus' parables, the most striking lesson for us to learn is found in what Jesus doesn't say, who he doesn't mention. There is nothing wrong with this man doing well for himself; but there is something tragic about him overlooking the absent others, those who could expand his perspective. And consequently, the tragedy is not in what the farmer has done, the tragedy is in what he hasn't done. "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you've prepared for yourself?"

³⁶⁰ Kyle Field is the football stadium where the Texas A&M Aggies attempt to beat their arch rivals, the Texas Longhorns, every Thanksgiving night. I am a proud alumnus of the University of Texas at Austin, and I bleed burnt orange. Hook 'em!

The church that I serve in College Station identifies itself as “progressive.” That is who we say that we are, because we believe that word, that identifier, articulates much of who Jesus is and who Jesus calls his church to be. But if we do nothing to invite in the absent others and their experiences, their perspectives, their struggles to shed God’s light on that word, ‘progressive,’ and if we do nothing to then act upon that renewed perspective, then we are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal; and that word becomes as worthless as crops left rotting in oversized barns.

The question posed to Jesus that prompts this parable is about a legal dispute. Someone calls out to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” It’s a reasonable question, and there are vocations set aside for solving such disputes (otherwise my dad and my brother would be out of a job).³⁶¹ But this is not Jesus’ job; this is not who Jesus is. And so he answers, “Who made me a judge or an arbiter over you?” Jesus is about inclusiveness and reconciliation, about mending brokenness to yield blessings and new life. That is who Jesus is. And we understand Jesus to be the Word made flesh, the ultimate manifestation of the very being of God; God who judges the peoples with righteousness, not legalism. So, when this Jesus is asked by one man to have his brother divide the inheritance appropriately with him, Jesus is being asked to decide who is more right in their greed; whose greed is more just. But greed is what drives a wedge between neighbors as well as enemies. Greed is a divider, and it is not who Jesus is.

The Coptic Gospel of Thomas does not appear in the canon of the Bible. It’s one of those books that didn’t make the cut when a group of men were deciding which books could stay and which ones couldn’t so many years ago. (It’s like Robin Williams in the movie, *Dead Poet’s Society*, ripping out those pages and saying, “Be gone, J. Evans Pritchard!) But the Gospel of Thomas also mentions today’s story. Saying 72 from the Gospel of Thomas reads like this: “A man said to him, ‘Speak to my brothers, so that they will divide my father’s possessions with me.’ [Jesus] said to him, ‘O man, who made me a divider?’ He turned to his disciples; he said to them, ‘I am not a divider, am I?’” That puts a potent twist on it. I read today’s Scripture and I feel like Jesus is asking us, asking the Church, “I am not a divider, am I?” And then Jesus persists, “If that’s true, then who made me a divider?” Surely not I, Lord! Surely not I, Lord!

If the Church is the ultimate representation of Jesus the Christ in the world, then what is the Church doing to demonstrate that identity? The world is plagued by divisions; divisions of judgment, of prejudice, of homophobia, of sexism, of nationalism, of warmongering, of hypocrisy, of self-righteousness. That divisiveness rips and tears at the fabric of the human condition. It separates one religion from another, one country from another, one generation from another, one race from another, one neighbor from another. And the further we drift apart, the more the whole of God’s creation suffers. And if the Church does nothing to speak out and act

³⁶¹ My father, Hector, and my younger brother, Ben, are lawyers in the law firm De Leon and Washburn, Austin, Texas.

out against such divisiveness, then the Church is complicit in it. This is the tragedy of inwardly focused ignorance, and this peripheral vision sends a message from the Church to the world that Jesus is a divider.

Michael Piazza is a co-pastor of Cathedral of Hope, United Church of Christ, Dallas, and he's published various books on the subject of church renewal. He gave a presentation at a regional meeting of the UCC this past June. Piazza began the presentation with what he called his biases that come from an adult life spent pastoring mainline churches: He said: "First, I believe the world needs what the Church of Jesus Christ has to offer: grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, community, hope, peace, values, justice, God. Second, I am deeply offended that people don't get what the church has to offer because of what they justifiably *think* the Church offers: judgment, division, prejudice, homophobia, sexism, nationalism, warmongering, hypocrisy, self-righteousness."³⁶²

Sisters and brothers, we cannot be the Church of Jesus if we do not reflect the ministry of Jesus. So, as a guest in your church this morning, I'm compelled to ask you, in the words of Lewis Carroll's caterpillar, "Who are you? Who is First Baptist Church of Austin?" I appreciate your incredible history. I appreciate so much of what I have learned from this church. I appreciate your missions and music and milestones, and your storied legacy of great preachers and pastors, not to mention your amazing youth ministers.³⁶³ But who are you?

Your website identifies you by three words in the upper right corner of the screen: 'compassionate,' 'thoughtful,' 'progressive.' Well, newsflash: our culture is not compassionate or thoughtful! And progressive? There are angry guys on the radio and talking heads on TV who make it sound like that's a bad word. But we do not define ourselves or identify ourselves based on what culture is saying. We do not determine who we are based on what the world has to say about any word. We are called to be in the world but not of it. We find our identity in Christ, and we find words to articulate that identity based on our witness to the Scriptures that reveal a God of justice and mercy and love, and how that Creator God, creating still, has related to and interacted with God's people throughout history. That old, old story that tells us how we can never be separated from the love of God by anything in this world, not even death; that story informs and shapes our identity. That is how we come to understand what it means to be compassionate, thoughtful, progressive. That is how we stand firm in who we are.

But do those in your community who need compassion and thoughtfulness and the fruits of progressivism, do they know that? The ones who need grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, community, hope, peace, values, justice, and the

³⁶² Michael Piazza, "Progressive Renewal: Invitation to the Dance," presented at the South Central Conference of the United Church of Christ Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 5 June 2010.

³⁶³ I served as the interim youth minister at First Baptist Church, Austin, from May of 1997 to August of 1998.

love of God that is in Christ Jesus, do they know that you are compassionate, thoughtful, progressive? Because if they don't, then those words lose their meaning, they become uprooted from the gospel of Jesus Christ, and they run the tragic risk of not reflecting his ministry.

Here's an example of a progressive Baptist church: In the Antebellum period slaves who were married were often displaced from one another. A man would be purchased by one owner, and that same man's wife would not, and vice versa; so a slave might have been married, and his wife would still be very much alive, but the couple would never see each other again in this lifetime. These slaves would sometimes find new life companions, and churches used this peculiarity against these already tormented human beings to act out their racism. Churches would excommunicate these slave couples on grounds of immorality and infidelity. But Welsh Neck Baptist Church of South Carolina decided that granting these slave couples membership was "less evil" than excommunicating them. The minutes from Welsh Neck Baptist Church during that time state the following:

That servants separated by their owners, and removed to too great a distance to visit each other, may be considered dead to each other; and therefore at liberty to take a second companion, in the lifetime of the first; as the act of separation was not their own voluntary choice; but the will of those who had legal control over them.³⁶⁴

This is a progressive group of Christians being able to see beyond the religious legalism of their time in order to find a way to help these families that were so different from their own. And you can be sure that these slave couples with their peculiar experiences, perspectives and struggles shed lot of God's light on who that church was and where they could go.

That's a glimpse of being progressive in the name of Christ Jesus. It means searching out the absent others and listening to their stories, listening to who they are. And in doing so, the scales fall from our eyes so that we see the crops in our barns less as accumulated wealth and more as the abundant blessings of God. It means, as we say in the UCC, never placing a period where God has placed a comma.

Here's what it means for me: Tyra is a Christian. She loves her faith. But her family and her home church constantly ridicule her for being gay. This makes it tough for her to keep being a church-going Christian.

Tyra had been visiting our church for a few weeks, so she and I went to lunch. After we broke the ice, I asked her, "So, Tyra, what's it like living in College Station and being gay?" (And by the way, for anyone who's still on the fence about whether one's sexual orientation is a choice? Move to College Station and choose to be gay. Let me know how that works out for you. But I digress...) Tyra told me about how some friends of hers, two lesbian couples, went to the movies one night. They weren't holding hands or showing any kind of affection, too dangerous to do that; but it was

³⁶⁴ Flunder, 14.

still pretty obvious that they were gay. When they got out of the movie, there was a group of young men waiting for them. The men started yelling at these women, calling them derogatory names, getting in their space. The four women ran to their car, but the men kept following them. “Where do you think you’re going? Come back here!” they yelled. The women jumped in their car, slammed the doors and sped away—hearts pounding, lives threatened.

Tyra has a partner that she’s been with for a couple of years, and the incident caused them to have a pointed conversation. Tyra knows Taekwondo, so she said to her girlfriend, “Baby, if we ever get in a situation like that, you run. Do you hear me? You run. I can take care of myself.” Now, when Stacy and I go to the movies, she and I don’t need to have that kind of conversation. The thought doesn’t even cross our minds. But because I know of Tyra’s experience and her perspective and her struggle, I will never look at that simple luxury the same way ever again. Forbid it, Lord, that the Church would ever look like that night at the movies. Tyra’s story now informs my faith and who I understand Jesus to be, so I can never look at the crops in my barn the same way again; because, as Martin Luther King, Jr. says, “A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

So, who is First Baptist Church? Well, for me, this is the place where I learned that God is love.³⁶⁵ And I now know that God’s love means that no one should ever be made to feel separated from that love, and that no one should ever be shunned or turned away from the blessings of Christ’s Church, the crops in this barn that we cherish. I know that because of who you are. I know that because of who this church is.

So, sisters and brothers of First Baptist Church, Austin, it is my persistent and ceaseless prayer for you that you would continue to live lives of faith that are thoughtful and compassionate and progressive so that at end of this day and the end of all days we might be united by the glory of God and saying, one soul to another, “Soul, you have done well for the kingdom of God and all of its righteousness.” Amen.

³⁶⁵ I grew up a fourth generation member of FBC, Austin.

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