

For decades now,
we have found ourselves
caught up in a culture war:

US VERSUS THEM.

The good news: There is no them.

Our culture war has been a civil war:

US VERSUS US.

This is the untold story of religion and
the LGBT community. Thankfully,
there is a path toward peace . . .

ANDREW MARIN

AUTHOR OF *LOVE IS AN ORIENTATION*

Andrew Marin thickens the plot once again. You can try to say LGBT people are through with religion or are not themselves particularly religious, but the findings from this ambitious study suggest there is much more to the story.

MARK A. YARHOUSE

Rosemarie Scotti Hughes Endowed Chair and professor of Psychology,
Regent University

This book will shatter the predominant caricature many in the church have of LGBT folk. They are, as Andrew Marin's research reveals, just like us. For those of us to whom LGBT are people with faces, this research will be received not with surprise but relief. Finally now, can we get on with seeing the other rightly, and that must surely start with the Imago Dei. This book should be read far and wide.

DEBRA HIRSCH

Author, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*

Almost all discourse and writing about LGBTs and faith ebbs to theology and biblical interpretation. What's been sorely missing are sociological insights—anchored to research rather than opinion—of the current landscape. Andrew Marin offers a profound gift to us (however you define “us”) that will, I'm confident, lead to more understanding, more inquiry, more grace, and more love.

MARK OESTREICHER

Partner in The Youth Cartel and author of *Hopecasting: Finding, Keeping and Sharing the Things Unseen*

Through meticulous research and in-depth interviews, Andy Marin reveals some staggering truths about the religious beliefs and experiences of LGBT people. The results are both shocking and hopeful. I had to pick my jaw up off the ground at some of the statistics and testimonies in this book. If *Us versus Us* doesn't

produce a radical posture shift in the evangelical church, then God help us all.

PRESTON SPRINKLE

Author of *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue*

The groundbreaking research behind *Us versus Us* changes the conversation between the LGBT community and the church, offering new insight into how these two communities can relate to each other within one of our society's most prevalent culture wars. This book is not only timely and important but also profoundly helpful, addressing how to understand and heal so many painful experiences between religion and sexuality. Give yourself and the rest of humanity a gift; read it.

WM PAUL YOUNG

Author of *The Shack*, *Cross Roads*, and *Eve*

God and gays are closer than you might imagine, and the gap is shrinking every day. If you think America is doomed to a future of polarization and culture wars, Andrew Marin provides an antidote, with the hard data and human stories to back it up. This bighearted, richly textured book will shatter stereotypes and help us all think better. And love better too.

JONATHAN RAUCH

Senior fellow, the Brookings Institution

No conversation in the church is more explosive than the sexuality debate, and no voice in this conversation is more effective than Andrew Marin's. These deeply personal debates often divide more than unite, but Marin's sober and winsome approach summons both sides to a common table. *Us versus Us* is a page-turning collision of stats and stories with the power to revolutionize the modern sexuality debate. Do not miss it—the church will be discussing it for a long, long time.

JONATHAN MERRITT

Author of *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined* and senior columnist for Religion News Service

US VERSUS US

The untold story of religion and the LGBT community

ANDREW MARIN

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Us versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community

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Contents

INTRODUCTION *ix*

CHAPTER 1: **THERE IS NO THEY** *1*

86% of LGBTs were raised in a faith community from the ages of 0 to 18

CHAPTER 2: **THE GREAT EXODUS** *31*

54% of LGBT people leave their religious community after the age of 18

CHAPTER 3: **THE NEW PRODIGALS** *65*

76% of LGBT people are open to returning to their religious community and its practices

CHAPTER 4: **FAITH IN EXILE** *91*

36% of LGBTs continue their faith practices after the age of 18

CHAPTER 5: **AN ORIENTATION OF PRAYER** *113*

80% of LGBT people regularly pray regardless of religious identification or affiliation

CHAPTER 6: **AGE MATTERS IN THE CULTURE WAR** *131*

The LGBT experience before coming out, and the dynamics of closeted adulthood

CONCLUSION: **MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER** *151*

APPENDIX A: **THE SURVEY** *167*

APPENDIX B: **LGBT PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS** *175*

APPENDIX C: **LGBT MINORITIES AND THEIR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES** *179*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS *199*

NOTES *203*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *214*

Introduction

It was March 2013 and I was in Australia for the entire month. As much as I enjoyed one day at possibly the most gorgeous beach I'd ever seen, and another visiting the Australia Zoo founded by my childhood hero Steve "Crocodile Hunter" Irwin, I was there for another reason. In twenty-eight days I gave forty-seven talks up and down Australia's East Coast about my experiences building bridges between the LGBT community and social, political, and religious conservatives. I addressed LGBT nonprofits, universities, churches, denominational headquarters, and even members of Parliament.

The first of these talks started two hours after I got off the plane in Sydney. It was for an event connected to Mardi Gras, Australia's enormous gay pride parade taking place the following day. I was going to be marching with Freedom2b, one of their country's oldest LGBT faith-based organizations. Though quite foggy and completely jet-lagged, I thought I managed a coherent explanation to Freedom2b's national gathering about the history and impact of The Marin Foundation's I'm Sorry Campaign at Chicago pride parades.

That next morning I met a large group of Freedom2b

members in the park where the parade begins. We were a few hours early, but the music was already pumping, the vibe was great, and everyone was in good spirits. About an hour before the march, one of the organizers tapped me on the shoulder. “You’ve *got* to see this!”

She took my hand and led me around a corner, up a hill, across a field, past a huge McDonald’s, and into another field next to the parade route. She wouldn’t tell me what I *needed* to see; every time I asked, she responded, “*Just wait!*”

Five minutes later our journey ended with her pointing to a group of people. “Do you know them?” she asked with a big smile on her face. I looked in their direction and saw about thirty Asian young adults standing under a large tree in front of a fence. Most of their backs were turned, but no, I didn’t know them.

“Go over there,” she said, “and talk to them.”

I must be missing something, I thought. So I started walking over to them. It looked as though they were unpacking a picnic. When I was about ten feet away I heard a loud yell: “*No!*”

One of the people in the group was running toward me. He put his face close to mine and, with quite a bit of pressure, put each of his hands on my shoulders. “You’re the hug. Yes? You’re the hug. Yes?”

I was totally confused. So I hugged him.

As soon as I embraced him, he started crying. I guess he did need a hug? So I just kept hugging him until he decided the hug was going to be over. When he finally did, in his native tongue he called over a woman in his group, while apologizing to me for his choppy English. As she was on

her way, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of white computer paper. He handed it to me. I began unfolding it. And when I saw what was on it, *I* started crying. Hard.

It was a picture of myself; my wife, Brenda; and our friend Nathan. We were hugging a man in his underwear at Chicago's 2010 pride parade.¹

My new friend pointed at the picture, then pointed at himself. Pointed at the picture again, then pointed at himself. Pointed at the picture a third time, then pointed at himself. And then he gave me another hug.



That picture. That picture started a public revolution of love. That picture, taken by Michelle Gantner from Maladjusted Media, has been viewed over 134 million times in over 140 countries. That picture was ranked #1 by BuzzFeed on its list of “21 Pictures That Will Restore Your Faith in Humanity”

and named by Imgur as one of the twelve best images of 2012.² That picture, along with its companion photograph of us with our signs and “I’m Sorry” T-shirts, was shared all over social media by celebrities, politicians, and professional athletes alike.

When Brenda, Nathan, and I hugged this gay man marching in Chicago’s pride parade, we had no idea Michelle was taking our picture. It never crossed our minds that anyone outside the three of us would ever know about it. Yet each summer since 2010 that picture has gone viral leading up to pride parades around the world.



My new friend’s translator finally arrived and told me this entire group of young adults had flown from Asia to Sydney specifically for Mardi Gras, with the blessing of the elders in their church, “to show Christ’s love to gay people by giving hugs like the Christians in Chicago, USA.” I heard that and I was wrecked! To witness what the Lord was doing through

our little neighborhood's I'm Sorry Campaign was almost beyond belief.

Christians and gay people hugging. Christians telling gay people "I'm sorry." These pictures have become symbols for hope that the LGBT community and people of faith can come together in an embrace—even as the rest of the world banters on about how such an embrace can never happen. Love can still heal wounds. Love can still conquer hate. Love can still change the world. Even today.

Dignity, Difference, and Data: The Story of *Us versus Us*

Unlike coups, civil wars, and other earth-shaking events, revolutions of peace and reconciliation never start big. In our case, a man we didn't know just gave us a hug in an unusual setting because of a shirt and sign we made.³ This all started from an idea cooked up in a church basement by a gay Christian man working for The Marin Foundation. That's all it was. And yet, as I've now seen firsthand over and over again, one small act of love is all it takes. There is no one right answer for how to heal a generation's worth of relational pain between these two communities. And yet no matter how small, each new idea has the potential to revolutionize the LGBT-faith conversation.

In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that in the midst of severe clashes of culture, ideology, and religion, we can still experience unity, even in disagreement. We achieve this unity by committing ourselves

to learning from each other, by developing a theology of commonality alongside a theology of difference.

These themes are at the heart of the research study behind this book, the largest ever done in the North American LGBT community regarding the intersection of religious beliefs, faith practices, and sexual orientation. In statistics and stories revealed for the first time, *Us versus Us* provides direct scientific insight into the culture war defining a generation. As it turns out, our data suggests that when it comes to faith communities and the LGBT community, *they are us*, and *we are them*.

Whether you are LGBT or heterosexual, clergy or layperson, a person of faith or not, we all are somehow impacted by this conversation. To date it's been a conversation defined by opposition: People are routinely pigeonholed as pro-gay or anti-gay, progressive or conservative, welcoming or non-affirming. We have allowed the people comprising the conversation to be characterized by caricature.

In a world bent on creating such binaries, the research behind *Us versus Us* reveals there is *still* nuance in the world. Consider as only one example that *three out of four* of our study's respondents long to one day return to the religion of their youth, *irrespective* of that religion's theology of homosexuality (see chapter 2). I have committed my life to building bridges in defiance of a binary-building world, connecting opposing worldviews not based on common ground or even the prospect of future agreement, but rather on *fidelity* to the idea and process of reconciliation.⁴ In a world predicated on the belief that love demands agreement, I advocate for the lost art of loving in disagreement.

Toward that end, throughout *Us versus Us* I point from the research data to their implications for how the LGBT and religious communities can engage one another more hopefully and constructively. I see the intersection of these two communities as a point of connection, not a point of divide.

The idea for this research study began after I moved into Boystown, the predominantly LGBT neighborhood of Chicago, shortly after my three best friends came out to me.⁵ As a straight, cisgender,⁶ Christian male in the early 2000s, I had a steep learning curve living in Boystown. But I quickly observed a major recurring theme throughout my new surrounding: Many of my LGBT friends, neighbors, and acquaintances were brought up in religious environments. Not only that, but in one way or another, for good or for bad, whether they liked the outcome or hated it, they had been irrevocably shaped by the faith of their youth into the people they are today.

I had a difficult time retraining my preconceptions, as the strong ties I was witnessing between sexual orientation and faith clashed with what I'd always gathered from the media, my own church upbringing, and even public messaging from the LGBT community itself. LGBT people, so the narrative went, had nothing to do with religion; no two communities could be more alien to one another because no two communities sought such different outcomes.

After noticing this tension between cultural talking points and my reality, and because of my educational background in psychology which taught me to investigate unknown social phenomena, I began looking for any popular or academic

information on the topic of how religious upbringing shaped LGBT adults. I found very little other than a few autobiographical stories on the popular level; and the only published scholarly studies on LGBTs and religion were case studies connected to negative religious experiences, the views of heterosexuals regarding their LGBT relatives, the attitudes of religious heterosexuals toward LGBT people, and of course the debate over “reorientation” therapy.⁷ Although what I was able to find was informative, it didn’t touch the core paradox I experienced in the neighborhood.

So I turned to those I knew and trusted. I began informally asking my newly out best friends, and a few of our new LGBT friends in the neighborhood, to reflect on their own experiences with religion, church, and faith practices—how they felt each intertwined, or not, with their sexual orientation and various other aspects of their lives. Most spoke of their association with religion in pain and longing, with an openness I never expected. Often tears would fill our eyes as my LGBT friends told me they had never been able to talk about their religious experiences without being pressured or attacked with partisan talking points from either end of the spectrum.

Even as recently as September 2015, Gary Gates, research director at the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy at UCLA’s School of Law, noted that “there haven’t been many surveys of LGBT people over time where we can kind of assess how [perceptions and experiences] that exist now might have been different 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago.”⁸ As prominent of a debate within American culture as the LGBT community have found

themselves a part of, sociocultural research is just beginning to discover the simplest baseline norms to understanding both the historic and contemporary experiences unique to their community. This is even more true with religion, as it has largely been excluded from the standard variables of scientific investigation with LGBT people.

During the early years of my informal conversations, one of my first friends in Boystown was named Joe. We lived in the same building and got to know each other quite well as we spent hours together each week cleaning our clothes in our building's basement laundry room. One Sunday I invited him to church after he expressed interest in attending. Joe had not been to church since he came out during his undergraduate studies in Chicago, away from his parents who lived half a country away.

Shortly after the service started that next week, Joe got up from his seat and walked out. I waited about five minutes but he didn't return. So I stepped out of the sanctuary and saw him through a stained-glass window, sitting on the church steps outside. I popped my head out the door and asked if he wanted to talk. He shook his head no. I could only imagine the emotions he was sifting through, and instead of persisting in my Christian duties to invite him back in, I just told him I would meet him after the service if he decided to stay outside. Which he did.

After the service I met Joe on the same steps he had been on the entire time. I put my arm around him and we walked to our favorite neighborhood spot for brunch. Immediately he began telling me about growing up in church. He loved being in "God's house" because it made him feel known by God.

“I was hiding my true self from everyone because I had convinced myself they wouldn’t accept me if I told them I’m gay. But knowing that God knows who I really am and loves me anyway—that always made me feel everything was okay in the moment. That’s why I loved just being by myself in church.”

In youth group, during the occasional Sunday service, even in casual conversations with his parents, Joe grew up hearing about the “gay agenda.” He became fearful of who he might turn into if he gave in to “living gay.” He kept attending church and kept having the same conversations with people who didn’t know they were talking about him. Joe gradually decided that he wanted his faith and the church more than the church and his faith wanted him. At a fundamental level Joe was okay with this realization; he knew he didn’t want to give up on God, maybe just all the other stuff that came with “God’s house.”

Joe’s story illustrates a persistent theme throughout my initial conversations in Boystown: Despite so many experiences of rejection, whether direct or just being alluded to, LGBT people continually demonstrated a sheer perseverance of faith. It would have been easy to give up on not only Christians and the church, but also on God himself. But time and again, I heard from people who hadn’t. The impact from these conversations left more than a hole in my heart. It left a longing for my family, the church, to see and hear what I was seeing and hearing through people like Joe. I wanted to help the church I love regain the ability to love in tangible ways. I wanted nothing more and nothing less than the strength of Christ’s love to be shown to the LGBT community.

Over the coming months I was preoccupied spending time with my LGBT friends and neighbors, sitting in their stories with them. I kept thinking it was the very least I could do to reciprocate the intense gift of vulnerability they continued to offer me. I knew this was something I could never repay, so I just continued talking to my friends, their friends, and friends of theirs. I kept meticulous notes that filled a dozen or so Moleskines. After a while I started to see emerging patterns. In rough form, here are my original, non-scientific observations:

1. Most LGBT people regularly attended a faith community for the majority of their youth.
2. Most had left the church after they came out.
3. Most still believed in God and were interested in one day finding a faith community.
4. Most were less concerned with a church's theology of homosexuality than they were with how they were treated by individual Christians at church.

In these conversations I wasn't seeking out LGBT persons who had current connections to religion or a church community. In fact, most of my conversations happened while I hung out with friends in Roscoe's Tavern in Boystown. Yet each story and common conclusion flew directly in the face of the cultural narrative presented by *both* the church and the LGBT community.

I began to wonder whether these conversations were a fluke, just a chance coincidence. I wondered if LGBT people

across the country have the same experiences and conclusions as those in my neighborhood. At that moment the idea for the research study behind *Us versus Us* was born.

To start the process I created a scientific survey to broadly test the question, *What is the religious experience of LGBT people?* I was two years removed from my undergraduate degree in applied psychology, with a concentration on survey design and statistical analysis. Though such a rudimentary education is a far cry from an official designation as a “clinical researcher,” I had spent the final two years of university (and six months after that) working under the direct tutelage of some of the nation’s top academic principal investigators in their field. I had been paid as a researcher on two continuing grants from the National Institutes of Health focused on the effects of exercise and group activity on persons with developmental disabilities. My contribution to the study was survey creation and collection. Sometimes it does make a difference being the research assistant!

Without getting too technical, the survey behind *Us versus Us* investigated dozens of variables regarding religion and the LGBT community through four main factors: spirituality, LGBT acculturation, religious acculturation, and LGBT tolerance of religion.⁹ (Appendix A has the complete survey used for this research.)

After a year of continual work on the survey, it was complete. Over that span I made frequent visits to the principal investigators on my old job. They reviewed the newly crafted survey to make sure I was doing everything in accordance with the most stringent of academic scientific standards. In late 2006 I began

sample testing the survey to check its validity. The initial results were overwhelmingly positive.¹⁰ With everything ready to go live, The Marin Foundation began the collection process.¹¹

Over the next six years, 1,712 usable surveys were collected, with at least twenty-one participants from each of the fifty states (plus Washington, DC).¹² This type of collection was quite an undertaking, as our research study is over ten times larger than scientifically normative studies for numerically small, self-identifying, minority populations such as the LGBT community.¹³ Also, this research's sample is more geographically generalizable than any others excluding census gathering.¹⁴

The best scientific research is informative, done for the sake of inquiry and education, with its new information contributing to positive cultural change. The worst offers data that is biased, doesn't tell the whole story, and is falsely generalized, creating more problems than before. The responsibility to offer the former and guard against the latter was on the forefront of my mind throughout every phase of this process, from the survey's conceptualization to writing this book.

I'm not naive, of course; at some level all research is biased.¹⁵ To mitigate inherent biases as much as possible—especially while quantitatively analyzing the data—I sought out some of the most highly specialized, widely respected clinical researchers in their communities regarding the scientific study of sexuality.

Besides the very intentional survey creation and collection, data entry, and storage safeguards put in place, I could think of no better way to gain an unbiased review of the quantitative results than by teaming Northwestern University's Dr. J. Michael Bailey—an atheist proponent of

LGBT issues (and one of the original researchers globally credited with finding potential genetic links to LGBT orientation)—with Dr. Mark Yarhouse, a conservative evangelical clinical psychologist and researcher who directs the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University (along with statistician Dr. Elisabeth Suarez, also of Regent, who is a frequent research partner of Yarhouse).

Bailey and Yarhouse are prodigious and continually controversial in their research, publishing, and cultural and scientific impact. And they come from polar opposite sides of the debate. They have serious misgivings about each other's research and conclusions. They have disputed each other's findings in the media and the academy. They have written critical articles and analyses about each other's conclusions for years. In fact, they had never met in person before I brought them together for this study. These two high-profile clinical researchers, who hardly agree on anything, analyzed and validated this research. They both stand with me behind the findings in *Us versus Us*. Just as important, by coming together under the umbrella of scientific inquiry they modeled my hope that people with irreconcilable convictions can nonetheless be reconciled to one another through a greater cause of human good.

Then to analyze the *more than twenty thousand* individual qualitative results I brought in Andrew Means, associate director of the Center for Data Science and Public Policy at the University of Chicago, founder of The Impact Lab consulting firm, and founder of Data Analysis for Social Good. Means and his team were given no small undertaking with

the sheer size of our data set, and the results which I explore in what follows are nothing short of culture changing.

While reading *Us versus Us*, keep in mind that the scope of this study is limited to the religious beliefs and experiences of LGBT Americans. The data can't address every question arising from the LGBT-religion disconnect, let alone its various global iterations. I will do my best, however, to be as thorough, generous, and practical as I can with what the data allow. I have committed my entire adult life and missionary work to being a bridge builder, and I'm proud of the work we have done through this study, thankful to all who have participated, and confident this research was conducted in as academically sound and unbiased a way as possible. I hope this research provides ears to hear, that more and more people will be inspired to seek peace in a way that discovers both commonality and the dignity of difference where pain and misunderstanding have for too long been the dominant narrative.

Exploring *Us versus Us*

Us versus Us is about revealing the surprising truth that neither side of the LGBT-religious culture war wants to admit. Its data will be unfolded one piece at a time, chapter by chapter. This study is original, and its topics have never been scientifically researched until now.

In order to present the complexity of the research in its most accessible form, each chapter title is based on a significant finding about the LGBT community and their

intersection with religion, faith practices, and sexual orientation. The content of each chapter will extrapolate on the opening finding to explore the data and consider practical implications that intertwine the church, the LGBT community, and broader society. For so many years hype and hyperbole have overtaken the unspoken realities about the LGBT and religious disconnect. Thus my aim is that every statistic be viewed as concrete being poured into a foundation for more honest, respectful, and constructive conversations, both in private and in the public sphere.

Although *Us versus Us* is based on a research study heavy with numbers, P values, and statistical correlation, its content will not be presented in a scholarly fashion. The statistics will rather be a launching point for the real lives and narratives that comprise and, indeed, *are* the results. My goal is that this book will provoke the creative thinking necessary to make individual and systemic changes to foster needed, sustainable, social reconciliation between LGBT people and the church.

Of note, although *church* is classically thought of as a reference to Christendom, I'm defining it as "diverse forms of societal organizing around faith," so as to include the non-Christian faiths reported in our data: Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism being the three largest of the eight reported religions (see chapter 1). That being said, Christianity is the overwhelmingly dominant religion in the backstory of the LGBT religious experience in America. Moreover, my own convictions are informed by Christian theology, and my observations, insights, and prescriptions are indeed grounded in the Christian faith.

As David Kelsey, Luther Weigle Professor Emeritus of Theology at Yale Divinity School, suggests, one is entitled to know at the outset whether a book is going to address questions that are actually of *ultimate concern* to the reader. It is toward such ultimate concerns that I have attempted to shape the content and flow of *Us versus Us*.

Chapter 1 considers the surprising finding that 86 percent of LGBT people were raised in a faith community from age 0 to 18.

Chapter 2 explores the reality that 54 percent of LGBT people left their faith community after the age of 18.

Chapter 3 highlights the 76 percent of LGBT people who are open to returning to faith and its practices.

Chapter 4 details the faith practices that 36 percent of LGBT people continue after the age of 18.

Chapter 5 explores the result that 80 percent of LGBT people regularly pray—whether or not they identify or affiliate with any religious faith.

Chapter 6 considers the impact of coming out on LGBT religiosity, given that the average age of coming out is 17 and yet an unexpected portion of the respondents are still closeted well into adulthood (at an average age of 32.5).

Appendix A presents the full survey behind *Us versus Us*, appendix B overviews some LGBT participant demographics, and appendix C offers specialized insight into the religious experience of minorities in the LGBT community. Due to the size restrictions of this book, the appendices will be available in more detail as free downloadable PDFs at usversusbook.com.

Us versus Us is not merely a presentation of statistics; the

survey allowed for participants to speak freely on a number of topics. You will therefore hear directly from the participants' responses. Although all stories are true and all quotations are direct, some of the names have been changed to protect people's privacy.

There are a number of reasons people might read *Us versus Us*. Parents may want to better understand their LGBT children. Gay Christians may want to compare their experience against others in the LGBT community. Clergy may be looking for insight into how they can enter the LGBT-faith conversation well. Religious laypeople may be curious about the spirituality of their LGBT neighbors. Some people may simply be looking for ways to reinforce their position in the LGBT-faith culture war. Whatever the motivation, the coming days, months, and years will extend the LGBT-faith conversation well beyond the words on these pages. My prayer is that *Us versus Us* helps us all approach this conversation more intelligently and more respectfully, that we might give and receive love not predicated by agreement but in the power of the sacred communion God offers all his children—that we might be reconciled to each other through his love.

*Much love,
Andrew*

CHAPTER 1

THERE IS NO THEY

86% of LGBTs were raised
in a faith community from
the ages of 0 to 18

*I am who I am today and believe what I believe
today because of the best of what [my church]
taught me!*

Kevin, a 52-year-old gay man, raised in an evangelical church

RAISED IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

- 75%: General American population
- 86%: LGBT

Data on general population from National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008

“From my earliest memories I remember my parents always dressing me up nicely and taking me to church every Sunday.” Carl, a 26-year-old gay man living in Chicago, Illinois, represents the overwhelming percentage of LGBT respondents who were raised in a religious community. “They loved that place. I never really minded it until I understood what ‘gay’ meant—in myself and in the church. Then it got all super intense and confusing, and I felt my churchgoing experience drifted away from what I understood a faith in God was

supposed to mean. So no, I wouldn't go back now. But I sure can't deny how it implanted faith in me. Sometimes I think it's like a virus I can't shake."

Seemingly everywhere I turned during my decade living in Boystown, I met another LGBT person raised in a religious community. But in the back of my mind I was skeptical. Did I somehow socially gravitate toward LGBT people raised in religious communities? Was I just hearing what I

.....
*Sometimes I think it's like
a virus I can't shake.*

CARL, A 26-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN,
ON HIS CHILDHOOD FAITH

wanted to hear? Was I hypersensitive to LGBT people with religious backgrounds because of my own religious upbringing? I had no idea.

Because of these persisting doubts

..... I defaulted to my normal way of resolving such problems: I blatantly asked the same question of everyone I came in contact with. Wherever I went, whomever I was talking to, I would not-so-subtly slip into the conversation, "So, were you raised in a religious community or not?" As Lauryn Hill states, if you're looking for the answers, you've got to ask the questions.¹

Whenever someone responded, I would pull out my trusty old on-the-go PalmPilot and tally the response. This process was, of course, completely unscientific. But based on the overwhelming "yes" responses, for the first time I realized I was indeed hearing my neighborhood's stories correctly, regardless of what random person I happened to ask.

As I mentioned earlier, I tried and failed to find published data about the impact of childhood religion on LGBT persons. This revealed quite a conspicuous gap in the literature,

because if national percentages were anything close to my informal neighborhood straw poll, the childhood faith of so many gay people would directly impact the dynamics of the budding culture war between the church and the LGBT community—which at that point emphasized theological and political differences without considering both communities’ actual backstories.

Around this time, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. The intense religious reaction to this legislation centered around a growing suspicion of a “gay agenda.” Logically I thought one or the other community would quickly turn their focus to LGBT religious experiences, if for no other reason than to raise the stakes by introducing God into the debate. But that never happened. And now, over a decade later, religion itself is at the center of the culture war—ground to be fought over, won, and owned by one side or the other.

Is 86 Percent Correct?

About 75 percent of Americans are raised in a religious community from ages 0 to 18.² Our research shows that the percentage of LGBT people raised in a religious community is *11 points higher* than the percentage for average Americans. Although this total is larger than even I expected, I was glad to finally have the hard data to back up my anecdotal evidence.

Beyond the initial shock of the finding, it validates the lives and experiences of LGBT people I know who feel so alone in their faith journeys. It offers that same validation to

the many other LGBT people whose journeys with faith have been met by deaf ears and unresponsive hearts. It reassures all those LGBT people with religious experiences and longings that they are not crazy. And most importantly, this 86 percent result brings a new social starting point to the LGBT-religion conversation. Carl, who had observed the same tendency among his gay friends that I had among mine, summed up the matter well: “It’s strange, right? I don’t get it but I’m sure with so many of us being raised in the church that it’s got to say something about the odd intertwining of our [LGBT and religious] communities’ paths.”

When the analysis showed an 86 percent result, I started double- and triple-checking the data. There are three main factors that could skew the findings upward: question bias, question confusion, and collection procedure. I began my search in the most obvious of places, survey question #31: “Were you raised in a specific religion?”

The scrutiny of this question begins and ends with the definition of “raised in.” Even the slightest of confusions could quickly lead to an inaccurate result. The survey defines the term in the introduction (in both print and online versions), and our research assistants read the definition out loud during the process of gaining participant consent:

Question #31 will ask you if you were “raised in a specific religion.” In this case, “raised in” is defined as your attendance of a religious service, event, gathering, conference, or group on average of at least one time per week throughout the ages of 0 to 18.³

This definition makes very clear that “raised in” can only be understood as long-standing, committed attendance. It rules out those who might have only regularly attended in spurts throughout their youth. Thus I’m quite confident the results are not affected by question confusion or bias.

Second, maybe the 86 percent was skewed by where and how we gathered participants? Another valid concern, yet our collection procedures followed the most rigorous standards for generalizable results.⁴

Third, because our research study focuses on religion, perhaps LGBT people with faith backgrounds self-selected while those from secular backgrounds were more likely to opt out? I am aware that our topic has a greater propensity to attract LGBT people drawn toward discussions of religion. But being drawn to religious discussions doesn’t require a formal religious background. In my experience, both religious and secular LGBTs consistently demonstrate an interest in religion, if for no other reason than to promote or defend their particular beliefs.⁵

In order to mitigate against self-selection, our research team intentionally did not partner with religious or faith-based LGBT organizations or events to garner participants. Nor did we partner with LGBT outlets who had overt connections to religious communities. Our participants were gathered in-person and online through partnerships with nonreligious entities: university groups, community centers, LGBT-rights organizations, nonprofits, HIV/AIDS groups and clinics, gay pride parades, the Gay Games, LGBT-specific neighborhoods, and online LGBT activist communities.⁶

Because these initial measures were in place prior to any collection of data, and because we double-checked the collection procedure after the fact, my very real anxiety about the validity of our findings was eased. Yet my sense of responsibility for what we had learned only increased.

The Burden of Responsibility

The 86 percent of LGBT participants raised in a religious community stretched over fifty-four denominations housed within eight religions.⁷ Perhaps more surprisingly than even the high percentage of those raised with religion, over three-fourths were raised in *theologically conservative* religious communities. This secondary finding suggests that both extremes of the culture war literally grew up together; these two traditionally opposed populations—the conservative church and the LGBT community—are intimately connected to one another. An overwhelming percentage of the LGBT community spent their youth being taught, spiritually formed, and disciplined in conservative religious circles.

This fact flies in the face of the dominant cultural narrative, which casts the parties to this conversation as opposing forces. In reality, the culture war has always been a civil war: *us versus us*.

Not surprisingly, the most common religious affiliations reported by respondents are consistent with the general American population.⁸ Interestingly though, the denominations with the most influence on our LGBT participants as

youth have also produced some of the most outspoken culture warriors against LGBT issues.

TOP THREE RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS LGTBTS ARE RAISED IN

- 19%: Catholic
 - 17%: Evangelical nondenominational
 - 9%: Baptist
-

Kevin, a 52-year-old gay man living in South Dakota, was raised in an evangelical church. He said,

Not one time have I heard any evangelical pastor or leader take responsibility for so many of us who were so personally influenced by them growing up. If they only knew I am who I am today and believe what I believe today because of the best of what they taught me! I'd love to hear even one of them admit that is a fact. But I don't think they ever will because then they would have to admit their role in why we're so mad at them.

An important building block to any sustained relational healing is humility. A humble admission of responsibility in spiritual development will go a long way. Just ask Leon, a 25-year-old gay man living in Lynchburg, Virginia:

I don't want to overthrow the religious system, get anyone fired, or cause anyone to leave their church.

I just want my own church, its leadership, and its members to take responsibility for how much influence they actually had in my life. They can't keep casting me as their "other" just because I'm gay, when in reality I am them. No, this isn't convenient for anyone, including myself. Sorry-not-sorry about that.

For every critique, however, there is something to celebrate. Sarah, a 21-year-old lesbian living in a small town in Wisconsin, continues to attend the evangelical church she was raised in.

I came out publicly when I was 17 and remember how horrible I felt leading up to the conversation I was going to have with my pastor, and ultimately

my church. And because I live in a small town, I knew I was coming out to my whole town at that point too. To my complete shock, when I came out everyone told me they loved me. The most memorable response I got actually came from my pastor. He said, "*We are going to learn to overcome hate together.*

.....
*I just want my own church,
its leadership, and its members
to take responsibility for how
much influence they actually
had in my life.*

LEON, A 25-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN
RAISED IN THE CHURCH
.....

We aren't going to hate each other. Then we're going to help our congregation learn to not hate either." I know he doesn't support gay marriage. . . . But for him to say that and then be by my side these last few years

continuing to help me grow in my faith—wow, I couldn't have asked for anything more. I know this isn't everyone's experience, but as cheesy as it sounds, there has to be a God and miracles do happen. I'm living proof of that.

The experiences of these three participants illustrate the complexity of the disconnect between religious communities and LGBT people. Even in measured generalizable themes, no two experiences are exactly the same or in need of the same solution. This is what makes it so difficult to pinpoint where to start a process of reconciliation. I have been in the thick of this conversation for years and have learned there's a huge difference between engaging extremists (such as anything to do with Westboro Baptist Church) and authentic, committed engagement of those on the other side of the conversation (for example, the careful research of Dr. Warren Throckmorton).⁹

Faith and sexuality are both extremely nuanced and tender constructs; they demand to be handled with care, intentionality, and humility. Yet faith and sexuality alike have been stripped bare by the easily quotable but carelessly considered conclusions of a culture war being fought in the Internet age. Sam, a 28-year-old gay man living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, holds a (sadly) unpopular view about how conversations about faith and sexuality should be conducted:

I'm not a headline. I'm Sam. Nice to meet you. Who are you? Tell me about your life. I know others will

tell me who they think you are, based on what others tell them, about what they think you should believe. But I want to hear about you from you. When I do that I can say I heard you and you can say that you were heard. At that point we might not agree but we're sure not enemies. I'm Sam. And I can't wait to get to know who you actually are.¹⁰

Think of the impact if Sam's view were the normal starting point for all—even most—of the LGBT-religion conversations taking place today.

Fortunately for us, the culture war has recently been given one such example. If there's anything the church should learn from the LGBT community over the past few years, it's how they have consistently reacted to one specific, high-profile religious conservative.

“Who Am I to Judge?”

In July 2013, on a plane ride from Rio de Janeiro to Rome, Pope Francis held one of his first major Q&As with the

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I'm not a headline. I'm Sam.

Nice to meet you.

SAM, A 28-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN

.....

media. The journalists were attempting to gauge (trap?) the newly chosen pope by asking him a variety of questions surrounding traditional hot-button issues with the Catholic church. When asked whether there

was a gay lobby in the Vatican, Pope Francis responded with a simple thought: “If someone is gay and is searching for

the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic church explains this in a beautiful way, saying . . . ‘no one should marginalize these people for this, they must be integrated into society.’”¹¹

That was it. Pope Francis did not say the Catholic church will change its sexual ethics. Nor did he say the Catholic church will allow LGBT bishops. Neither did he say the Catholic church will sanction gay marriage. He just reiterated that the church’s calling is not to judge or to marginalize but to integrate, regardless of differences in orientation. As an interested observer of religion my entire life, I’ve never seen anything like it from the pontificate. But the overly exuberant reaction he received from the LGBT community regarding this comment is completely disproportionate, going as far as *Advocate* magazine (the premier LGBT media outlet) naming Pope Francis their Person of the Year.¹²

I couldn’t be happier and more hopeful for the future of the culture war if this is the direction we’re headed. Yet it shows how much the LGBT community is longing to have their religious histories validated, in even the simplest manner. It also shows, sadly, just how far from cultural respect and relevancy the institution of the church has fallen if one kind word by someone in a place of religious power can explode the Internet.

On a local level, our research reiterates how simple statements of love do make a world of difference in the lives of LGBT people. Such statements generally come infrequently, and therefore when they do, they are received unexpectedly.

I live in a religiously conservative city, and I'm under no assumption the people here will think it's great if I marry a woman one day. But for how religious everyone is, a gesture of telling me I'm loved every once in a while would go a long way to how I view them and their version of God.

Sherry, a 36-year-old bisexual woman living in Colorado Springs, Colorado

I hear God's love is the great equalizer. It's hard to believe it when I've never been told God loves me. I think God loves me, but when I tried going to church a few years back, I sure didn't feel it. . . . I think they're scared I'm going to cause problems because we might not agree. I don't care about that. I want God's love to bring me into the fold like it does with everyone else.

Kim, a 42-year-old lesbian living in Jackson, Mississippi

There was no way I was going to step foot in a church after my transition. But my neighbors kept telling me how much they loved me because God loved me, and so I caved and went to church with them one Sunday. I haven't stopped going since. You could have offered me a million dollars ten years ago, telling me this was going to happen; I would have laughed in your face. I never realized the impact of what it meant to have someone tell me God loves me over and over. I actually believe it now.

James, a 53-year-old transgender female-to-male living in Omaha, Nebraska

No Religion Is Exempt

To this point I have focused on the LGBT-religion conversation as it pertains to Christianity. Due to Christianity’s dominance on the American religious scene, it ends up taking the majority of bullets for conservative factions of all Abrahamic traditions. But as our data reports, LGBT people are raised in more than just the Christian faith. Despite having numerically far fewer LGBT people raised in their traditions, LGBT representation in Islam and Judaism is consistent with the general American population. Take a closer look at how our study’s participants have experienced the other dominant Abrahamic faiths, Islam and Judaism.

.....

My neighbors kept telling me how much they loved me because God loved me, and so I caved and went to church with them one Sunday. I haven’t stopped going since.

JAMES, A 53-YEAR-OLD TRANSGENDER FEMALE-TO-MALE

.....

UPBRINGING IN ABRAHAMIC FAITHS COMPARED

	LGBT	General American Population
Protestant:	61%	51%
Catholic:	26%	24%
Judaism:	2.5%	2%
Islam:	0.2%	0.6%

Data on the general American population from Pew Research Center

.....

Islam. If there is one religious group that denies the existence of LGBT people, it’s Islam. It has been well documented,

from *CNN* to the UK's *Guardian* to the US Department of State, that the majority of Muslim communities around the world refuse to acknowledge the presence of LGBT people in their tradition. However, our data reports that the percentage of LGBT Americans raised in Muslim faith communities (0.2 percent) is comparable to the percentage of Muslims in the general American population (0.6 percent).

Islamic LGBT denial is embedded not just in the Middle East, but within American culture as well. Aafreen, a 22-year-old Muslim lesbian living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, feels the weight of this denial. "To people in my religion, including my own family, I don't exist. I can't be Muslim and a lesbian. So I have to choose to stay quiet or come out and leave my family and faith. I. Do. Exist! I shouldn't be put in this position."

One summer evening around 11 p.m. I received a text from Andrea, a good friend of mine who at the time worked as an intake agent at an LGBT homeless youth shelter in a large city. Her text was frantic, peppered with capital letters and exclamation points. A Muslim teenager, Aara, had dropped in to their shelter looking for help. Aara had been living homeless on the city streets for a few weeks since she came out to her family. Her father and brother had threatened to take her life if she didn't leave right away; if she ever tried to return, they would kill her. Andrea wanted to know if I knew any LGBT Muslim people in her city who could at least sit down and talk to Aara.

Though Aara's experience was on the extreme end, intense familial reactions are all too common. But what Aara's family

doesn't understand is that her faith, and the faith of so many others in her situation, doesn't magically go away once they come out.

Until coming out, Aara's entire existence revolved around her faith—her mosque, the rituals of her tradition, and the people in her community. Now she is left with nothing, living on the streets, not going to school, not seeing any of her family or friends, and not ever allowed back into the only life she has ever known, respected, and revered.

Aara heard about the LGBT youth shelter. Andrea was the first person Aara saw when she walked in, and the first person she opened up to since getting kicked out of her home. In tears, pleading for help, Aara unleashed all of her pain, insecurity, and overwhelming fear for what was to be a new existence she never wanted.

When I received Andrea's text, I contacted a friend of mine, author and interfaith activist Chris Stedman. I knew he did a lot of work with Muslims, and being gay himself, I was hoping he could put me in contact with some LGBT Muslims. He quickly responded with some information, and I passed it along. In the course of a few hours Aara went from being homeless and knowing nobody to having the support of not only the shelter and its programs but a small and active community of LGBT Muslims in her city. The frightening part to this positive outcome is how many other LGBT Muslims will never get a chance at life because their family and religious community could not live in reality.

The LGBT-religion conversation tends to focus squarely on stories of white, upper-middle-class LGBT teens and

adults, and their connection to conservative Christianity. Rarely does the conversation turn toward LGBT Muslims, even despite sometimes shocking incidents of mistreatment, including the now infamous video of extremists hanging three gay men over a wall in the Middle East. Of course, extremists exist in all religions, and they never speak for the masses. I can happily point to humble Muslim activists such as Eboo Patel who engage society with love, peace, and a commitment to building bridges. But the media silence on LGBT Muslims and their all-too-common negative experiences is troubling. Maybe it's because Muslim affairs generally are considered too sensitive; perhaps LGBT Muslims are especially unwilling to speak out. But if there is only one small contribution this research can make to the LGBT-Islam conversation, it's that our data proves the reality of LGBT people within Islam. I pray this study will amplify the already brave voices of those who speak for LGBT Muslims, declaring that they *do* exist at the same rate as the general American Muslim population.

Judaism. Rabbis often speak of the trials and journeys throughout the Hebrew Bible that G-d took the Israelites through. Forty years in the desert. Hundreds of years of forced slavery. Oppression and war by all surrounding peoples. Yet G-d's faithfulness and mighty saving hand were always there to protect Israel, to call Israel back to G-d. Very simplistically, the Torah is based on covenantal integrity and faithfulness to one's identity as G-d's chosen people.

Our research found that 2.5 percent of our respondents were raised in a Jewish faith tradition from ages 0 to 18. Jewish

leaders clearly understand there are very divisive contemporary questions originating from the middle of their sacred text. This is not new information, but for Jewish youth these contemporary questions are central to what it means to embrace a Jewish identity, with all its trials and the regular wrestling with G-d's faithful assurances.

If there was one thing Mary, a Jewish lesbian friend of mine in Boystown, could relate to from the religion of her childhood to her current life, it was this narrative of trials, journeys, and G-d's saving protection. Mary spent years attending synagogue and Hebrew school multiple times per week. What she was taught about homosexuality reduced down to one word branded in her brain: *abomination*, a word from the Levitical code that is regularly leveled against LGBT persons by hard-line religious conservatives of every faith tradition. Mary grew up with questions about the core of who she was but an inability to ask them of anyone within her religious community. She came to hate her faith because she believed her faith hated her. The moment Mary had the choice to stay or go, she could not have run away any faster.

Despite the accepting messages of LGBT orientation Mary heard from more progressive and reformed Jewish circles, until her thirtieth birthday she was convinced her orientation separated her from her community. What she couldn't change made her permanently unclean. Her family was uncompromising; homosexuality was a "corruption of the [law]." The dichotomy Mary feels to this day—that so many LGBTs of faith feel—regarding her family, the tradition she was raised in, and her current reality, results in a

fear of betraying a G-d that she finds difficult to even begin to address.

Even though the silence of her youth is something she commits to not continuing as an adult, Mary still struggles to ask the right questions about her sexuality and her faith. She knows who she *was*, a Jewish woman of G-d. And she knows who she *is*, a Jewish woman of G-d who is a lesbian. But even after all these years her journey, with all its past trials and those yet to come, continues without the openness she wishes she could have had during her formative years.

The Impact of 86 Percent

Mary's courage illustrates something that I have seen time and again with my LGBT friends. *They* are the ones who have to take the high road. They are forced, even as teenagers, to engage more maturely about their sexual orientation and faith than many of the adults in their lives. (More will be said on this in chapter 6.)

In most situations people raised in a religious community from ages 0 to 18 have no choice whether to attend. That decision is made by parents, guardians, or other influential adults in their lives. By adulthood a person has already been religiously formed; their religious expectations and perceptions are defined largely by their experience growing up. Even for those adults who decide to leave the faith, their childhood experiences aren't forgotten.

In fact, our data suggests LGBT people's early religious experiences deeply influence their lives as adults in both

positive and negative ways.¹³ LGBT people raised in a religious community spend significant effort throughout their adult lives either (a) living into what they have been taught or (b) actively separating from what they feel was forced upon them. Cindy, a 23-year-old lesbian living in Tucson, Arizona, feels a great sense of frustration over a reality she feels was decided for her:

I never had a choice growing up if I wanted to go to church or not. My parents dragged me every week, twice a week. I'd sit through Sunday service and then go to youth group on Wednesdays. I tried to be as good as I could while there, so I didn't embarrass myself or my parents. No one knew I was gay as I didn't come out until college. So for years I was forced to regularly listen to religious people around me joke about people like me. And now I have all this religious baggage that won't go away. It takes up so much of my thought life. I didn't choose to be gay and I didn't choose to go to church. I just wish I could have chosen my own time for religion as that's the one thing I could actually control. Instead I'm stuck trying to undo the shame that was put on me by people who didn't even know they were talking about me the whole time.

This is a very serious reality religious communities must pay attention to. All believers have a responsibility to the congruency between their communication of their faith and

how they live into what they communicate. I believe the truest test of an authentic faith is how our message and life are received by others who we didn't even know were paying attention. And now we find out the LGBT community has been paying attention the whole time—not just from afar but from the inside, throughout their years of religious, social, emotional, and physical development, from child to young adult.

If Cindy's experience is common to LGBT people raised in faith, no wonder LGBT people fight so hard against organized religion! Upwards of eighteen years' worth of ingrained experiences are a big deal. I understand negativity doesn't speak for all LGBT religious experiences. But as

we will explore in the next chapter, more than half of LGBT people raised in faith would challenge the positive self-assessment of how most churches view their engagement with the LGBT community.

.....
I have all this religious baggage that won't go away. It takes up so much of my thought life.

CINDY, A 23-YEAR-OLD LESBIAN
.....

In any event, now that we can say with confidence that such a large percentage of LGBT people were raised in religious communities, we have to begin finding a path to a meaningfully reconciled future as cultural neighbors. While I see clear significance from this 86 percent finding for the LGBT community—talk about organized religion is not an abstraction; it's talk about real people, neighbors and family members—I believe the responsibility toward reconciliation belongs first with the church, which has much to lament. But through lament can spring forth the

work of reconciliation that is the church's particular mandate (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

As a white, cisgender male, I don't know what it's like to be a part of a minority population that is received by the majority church culture with hesitation, if at all. But I do know what it is like to resent someone for their bad treatment of me, even to harbor feelings of hate or disgust toward them. Reconciliation uncomfortably presupposes pain and disconnection. And I know that increasingly, as Christianity is in the decline of its cultural power, there are people of faith who are starting to feel their own sense of marginalization in the public square, wrestling with their own feelings of resentment. Although this is not the same as the LGBT experience, it evokes the same challenge: whether to indulge the hate or to lean toward love and reconciliation.

Forgiveness is not forgetfulness; reconciliation can't happen unless there's a clear memory of the wrongs committed that bring about the need to reconcile in the first place. But neither is forgiveness earned, because love isn't a prize to be won. Love, for people of faith, is the precursor to forgiveness, to reconciliation. It is also, for people of faith, a personal responsibility.

Love is complicated. We want to be loved as we are even when we resist loving others who don't love us first. What if I show love to someone and they don't love me back? I get egg on my face twice. Is love worth the risk?

Love is further complicated by the cultural virtue of persuasion. Reconciling love demands humility in our proud world where being humble is less valued than being right. The

Golden Rule speaks directly and provocatively to our cultural moment: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). In the context of the LGBT-religion culture war: Model for those who have wronged you all the compassion, patience, and kindness that you wish they had offered you in the first place. This isn’t easy by any stretch of the imagination. In many situations, the value of meekness must be held in tension with our call to pursue justice. But humility, forgiveness, and love remain the way of the Christ follower.

Eugene, a 35-year-old gay man living in New Orleans, asks God for courage with his story—but not how many define courage.

I regularly pray that God would give me the courage to be loving with my story. In so many ways I hate Christianity for what my church did to me when they found out I was gay, how they have shunned my family for accepting me, and generally how much harm the faith causes my community. . . . I don’t want to be filled with hate for a people who believe in the same God I pray this prayer to. I need grace and a miracle to fill me with love when everything in me believes something different. I know only God can give that to me. So that’s why I keep praying every day.

Someone has to begin to love. This is how social healing happens.

This chapter is Day One for many religious people's new understanding of their relationship to the LGBT community. There is no they. It is, and always has been, us versus us. We just never knew it until now.

Reconciling ourselves to this new understanding takes time, which means it takes patience. Authentic reflection can't be demanded or rushed. Religious people need time to come to terms with our inherent connection (and responsibility) to the LGBT community. LGBT people need time to consider their religious heritage in a new light.

Implications for Religious Communities

In the days immediately after finding out that 86 percent of LGBT people were raised in the church, I contacted a handful of my theologically conservative friends in the pastorate to gauge their initial thoughts. There were, in essence, two types of responses.

The first was, "This isn't talking about my church. I don't ever remember LGBT youth or adults as part of our congregation or ministry." Their comments are right, *per se*. They have no recollection of LGBT people in their ministry because the LGBT people in their congregation had not come out yet, or had stayed closeted in the church. If we estimate the LGBT population in America at 7 percent of the total population (although some researchers suggest a lower percentage; I address how I arrive at this estimate in chapter 3), it's reasonable to assume that a small percentage of any given congregation—especially in larger churches

where anonymity is possible and even desirable for certain people—is LGBT.

Thus all preaching and teaching and interpersonal interactions, whether from the pulpit or in the halls or in the public square, should take into consideration that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people may well be present; they might just be keeping their sexual orientation to themselves (this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6). This has less to do with watching what we say and more to do with making sure even our simplest statements reflect God’s love for all his creation. Eighty-six percent is too large of a finding to ignore as we frame our communication of faith.

The second main response from my pastor friends was, “Given this long religious history of LGBT people, how do we move forward in conversation?” Three themes emerged from our data which can assist religious communities in constructive engagement with the LGBT community.¹⁴ These three themes are not earth shattering by any means. But if nothing else, they’re a good reminder and place to start.

- Take ownership of the role—both positive and negative—religion has played in LGBT formation.
- Validate the LGBT person’s religious experience.
- Help fix the validation and ownership problems that arise with others in your religious community.

The bulk of this chapter has dealt with the role religion has played in LGBT formation. I will conclude, then, by focusing on the second and third suggestions.

Our LGBT participants called on the religious community to validate their childhood religious experiences. It doesn't matter if an LGBT person is currently involved in a religious community or not; if they were raised in a religion, then that experience should be taken seriously.

I've seen countless religious folks tighten up when presented a church-based narrative from LGBT people. They don't know how to react and end up focusing on the LGBT person's current beliefs, values, and experiences—perhaps seeking to shift discussion away from the unknown topic of an individual's experience to well-publicized talking points. It's good not to be skittish about the important or controversial issues of our day, but it's relationally better to seek to understand those whom God brings into our lives, to learn their backstory as a means of understanding their present reality—their pains, joys, hesitations, and the like.

LGBT people have rarely had their religious experiences validated; more often, these experiences are dismissed as non-existent or unimportant. Engaging in an LGBT person's religious history and journey deflates the intensity of the most divisive of political and religious topics, while setting the tone for future mutual discovery and understanding. Anthony, a 61-year-old gay man living in Stamford, Connecticut, longs to have his religious history known:

I grew up in an era when we couldn't be gay, and oh how I longed to be known as gay without threat of violence. But now *all I am* is gay to the church. No one wants to talk with me about what it was like for

me to grow up in the South in a very religious home, and how that has shaped a lot of who I am and what convictions I have for the poor and oppressed. I'm fortunate enough to be a man of means today and tithes 10 percent each paycheck to charities. I don't do this out of obligation but out of a conviction to do good in the world, a conviction I learned growing up Baptist. I'd never admit this to some of my friends but I miss it a lot. It's a part of me that will never die. I feel sometimes I have more in common with my Baptist brethren than my own gay community. But that's a part of me that probably won't be known further because I can't find one of my Baptist brethren to get to know me enough to find that out. If they did, you couldn't pull me out of that church!

From an older generation to a younger one: Andy is a 19-year-old bisexual man living in Kansas City, Missouri. "I would argue that my spiritual journey is way more important than my journey to understand my orientation. It just seems most [people in my church] care about the reverse."¹⁵ Just ask LGBT people about their religious upbringing and see where it leads. In addition to my own experience doing exactly that throughout my neighborhood, if the responses above are any indication, it will lead to meaningful, redemptive conversations for all involved.

Our participants' third reminder for the church is to address the problems of validation and ownership that arise with others in our religious communities. Theologian Stanley

Hauerwas suggests that “trust is impossible in communities that always regard the other as a challenge and threat to their existence.”¹⁶ Trust imbues a culture of openness and accountability, allowing people to help others with topics or situations they can’t address on their own.

In the absence of such a culture, the opposite effect happens. I can easily recall a number of public outings of religious leaders in the past ten years alone. The results are calamitous, often tragic. Questions that immediately come to mind: How do these religious leaders find themselves in situations that create these scandals? Why don’t religious people, whose gospel is based on the grace and forgiveness of God, encourage the open and public addressing of the often-regarded taboo topics?¹⁷ What if just one of those outed Christian leaders felt enough trust growing up to be honest with just one of their parents, pastors, youth groups, or friends about their attractions?

At least for LGBT people of faith, according to our data the answer is painfully obvious and quite sad: Religious communities don’t know (or pretend not to know) that there are LGBT people in their communities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are abstractions, not congregants. What if the sexual ethics taught in church were to take into account the particular challenges of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people? Would these public outings and tragic falls have ever happened in the first place?

All hope in trust and openness is not lost, though, even amidst the very real questions which could have prevented such destructive outings. I’ve known Cary for almost ten

years. By his own admission he is a Christian and an out gay man. Married to his wife with whom he has three children, his situation is extremely unique. But Cary, a theologically conservative evangelical, refuses to hide in secrets and shame. He is living into his belief in a conservative sexual ethic (one man and one woman in covenantal relationship) while also living into the reality of his own sexual orientation. His wife has known about his orientation from the very beginning, and in this most unlikely of circumstances, love still blossomed.

Though this situation is not necessarily generalizable to all LGBT people (or heterosexual persons for that matter), it is a case study in the power of honesty. Today, beyond their day jobs, Cary and his wife run an evening discussion group for LGBT students at a well-known Christian university, some of whom are in LGBT relationships and others who are practicing celibacy. Cary and his wife are not forcing their situation onto anyone; nor are they setting an expectation that all, or any, must follow in their chosen path. But what they *are* forcing to the forefront is a reconstruction of the problem of silence. Living with trust, openness, and integrity is not something that should be shamed or hidden. Just as Cary's faith doesn't deny his orientation, neither does it subsume his most important distinction: his Christian identity through faith in Christ.

A culture that validates people's real experiences and shares responsibility for people's well-being, in contrast, gives people throughout the church the confidence and security to step up and help others address topics they can't address

themselves. It gives people the assurance they can open up about their deepest secrets without the fear of being shunned.

Eighty-six percent of LGBT people were raised in a religious community. That says as much about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as it does about the church. There is no separation between our communities. As Owen, a 24-year-old gay man living in Spokane, Washington, simply concludes, “When they get to know me, they will find they’re also finding themselves in me.”¹⁸ Welcome to the beginning of a new story between our two communities.