THE USE OF THE COMMUNION RITUAL FOR THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY CONGRUENCE AMONG LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL CHRISTIANS

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ABSTRACT

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Utilizing Identity Theory (Stryker 1980), this study contributes to the previous literature on lesbigay Christian identity negotiation by examining how participation in a religious community, particularly how participation in the ritual act of communion, aids in lesbigay Christians’ ability to reconcile their identities. The complexities of lesbigay Christians’ use of communion for their identity congruence are examined through the analysis of ritual and narrative. Participant observation and focus groups were conducted within a church consisting primarily of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Through six main findings this study demonstrates how lesbigay Christians uniquely perform the communion ritual and attach meanings to it in such a way that allows participation to aid in the process of identity congruence. These six findings are: communion demonstrates full love and acceptance, tolerates religious diversity, celebrates individualistic spirituality, creates a sense of belonging, affirms same-sex partnership, and is an act of social justice. This paper also discusses the implications of these findings and provides direction for future research.
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INTRODUCTION

Social psychologists have long studied the importance of highly salient identities for social behavior. (Highly salient identities refer to identities that are associated with relationships and roles that are important to the individual and thus are influential in guiding behavior.) What is less well known by social psychologists, however, is how individuals go about negotiating identity conflicts in cases in which two or more identities are roughly equivalent and highly important to the individual, but perhaps also incompatible with respect to social meanings and behavior. Studying lesbian, gay, and bisexual\(^1\) (lesbigay) Christian identity can help us understand the process by which two highly salient, but conflicting identities are negotiated in order to increase congruency and reduce conflict.

Homosexuality is not only a topic of controversy in society at large, but also, and perhaps more so, in the Church\(^2\). A few Christian denominations and groups such as United Church of Christ, Integrity (part of the Episcopal Church), Dignity (part of the Roman Catholic Church), and Lutherans Concerned have taken a positive stance on homosexuality; however, homosexuality is considered unacceptable by most mainstream Christian churches and denominations. Melton (1991) found that 72% of Christian Churches and organizations surveyed view homosexuality as an abomination to God. Other studies have found similar results, with many members of mainstream Christian denominations referring to lesbigay persons as “sinners” and “perverts” who are “evil” and “unnatural” (e.g., Clark, Brown, and Hochstein 1990; Greenberg and Bystryn 1982; Keysor 1979). Such debates not only create conflict within and between churches, but also within the lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christian individual.

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\(^1\) I did not purposely exclude transgendered Christian identity, however none participated in my study. Because there is no previous research on transgendered Christians, we do not know if and how their identity experience differs from the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians. For these reasons I will not refer to or discuss transgendered Christians in this paper.

\(^2\) “Church” refers to mainstream Christian churches and denominations.
For the lesbigay person who was raised in a church that condemned homosexuality as sinful and evil, internal conflict may arise. She/he may not only feel condemned by the Church, but also by God. Conflict between her/his lesbigay identity and Christian identity clearly poses an internal dilemma. Questions may arise such as “Am I going to hell?” and “Can I be both a Christian and a lesbigay person?” Studies have shown that lesbigay Christians are more likely to experience anxiety about their sexuality, have a greater sense of alienation, lower self-esteem, and greater cognitive dissonance than non-Christian lesbigay persons (Mahaffy 1996; Yip 1997). Such identity conflict resulting from the struggle between homosexuality and Christianity could be thought of as a crisis of meaning (Berger 1967). Some researchers have used the term cognitive dissonance to describe the conflict (e.g., Mahaffy, 1996; Thumma, 1991).

Feeling like their lesbigay identity person and their Christian identity are incompatible, lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians may try to abandon either their lesbigay identity or their Christian identity (Rodriguez and Oullette 2000). Abandoning the lesbigay identity may involve trying to become heterosexual through prayer, fasting, or counseling (Piazza 1994). In a study of how lesbian Christians reconstruct their sexual identities through their involvement with Exodus International (a Christian ministry dedicated to helping gay and lesbian people change their sexual orientation), Ponticelli (1999) found that six conditions were necessary for sexual identity reconstruction: adoption of a new universe of discourse, biographical reconstruction, adoption of a new explanatory model, acceptance of the transformed role, a shift from analogical reasoning to more definitive logic, and strong affective bonds.

Rejecting the lesbigay identity may also be accomplished through celibacy. Some Christian denominations and churches consider engagement in same-sex sexual relationships to
be sinful, but not necessarily same-sex attractions. So long as individuals are not engaging in same-sex sexual behavior, they are not considered to be homosexual (Keysor 1979).

Abandoning the Christian identity may involve leaving the Church or distancing oneself from God. Rejecting the Christian identity is accomplished by becoming non-religious or by becoming involved in a non-Christian religion that does not hold negative views toward homosexuality or lesbigay persons (Ellison 1993). Rejection of Christianity can also take place more subtly. By no longer attending church services and no longer praying or making reference to God, religion can quietly slip out of the lesbigay person’s life. Research has shown that about 62% of lesbigay people feel that religion is not an important part of their lives (Mahaffy 1996). Mahaffy found that among those that reported feeling conflict between their lesbian identity and their Christian identity, 19% no longer identified with the Christian Church.

When both the Christian identity and the lesbigay identity are highly salient, abandoning one identity may not be an option for lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians. In her study of lesbian and gay Christians, O’Brien (2004) found that many of her 63 participants identified strongly with the phrase “living the contradiction.” She found that for her participants, self-understanding came through their engagement with persistent internal conflict. Their identities were based on the tension between homosexuality and Christianity, which they lived out everyday. However, many lesbigay Christians cannot “live with the contradiction,” so they engage in identity negotiation, attempting to integrate the lesbigay and Christian identities, creating the necessary conditions for their congruency.
IDENTITY THEORY

Identity theory provides an optimal lens through which to understand lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Christian identity. Identity theory is based on the notion that an identity is part of the self, made up of the meanings individuals attach to the roles they play. Individuals are seen as “living their lives in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships, through roles that support their participation in such networks” (Stryker 2000, p.285). The probability that individuals enter any particular social network is influenced by the social structure (Stryker 2000). Social roles are the expectations that are attached to the positions individuals hold in their social networks. Identities are the internalized role expectations. They function as the frameworks of meaning that individuals use to interpret their experiences and define their reality.

Individuals hold multiple identities simultaneously (Burke 2003; Stets and Harrod 2004), which are organized in a hierarchical manner within the self. This hierarchy reflects the importance of and commitment to each identity—also known as identity salience. Identity salience can also be characterized as the likelihood that any given identity will come into play across a variety of situations. Because identities increase individuals’ receptivity to behavioral cues, the higher the identity in the salience hierarchy, the more likely it is that an individual’s behavior will correspond with the expectations of that identity (Stryker 2000).

Identities and behavior are linked through shared meanings (Burke and Reitzes 1981). If the social meaning attached to an individual’s behavior is inconsistent with their identity, then they will change their behavior so that is coincides with their identity. This is referred to as identity verification. If attempts to alter behavior, such that it will be in agreement with the given identity, are unsuccessful then the identity itself is altered (Stryker 1980). When identities with
shared meanings are enacted simultaneously, the meanings of both identities will gradually converge with one another (Burke 2006).

Sociology has long conceptualized persons as occupying multiple positions, playing out the diverse roles associated with those positions (Merton 1957; Parsons 1949; Turner 1978). Multiple identities may reinforce one another, but often they do not (Reitzes and Mutran 1995; Thoits 1983; Wiley 1991). When identities do not reinforce one another, identity conflict or competition may arise (Stryker 2000). This idea that identities can and do conflict with one another is widely understood in sociology and psychology (Gross, McEachern, and Mason 1958). For example, much research has been conducted on the identity conflict working women have faced with role demands from both work and family (Thoits 1986). In such situations of identity conflict, Identity Theory purports that the identity based on greater commitment to the given social network and higher salience within the self will be reflected in behavior (Stryker 2000).

What Identity Theory does not account for, however, is what takes place when two or more identities of high and roughly equivalent levels of salience are in conflict with one another. Thumma (1991) pointed out that individuals’ self-concepts often become organized around a “core identity” (Gecas 1981), also called a “master status” (Becker 1963). The stability of the core identity “resides in the interplay between one’s continual experience of the world, the relative meaning assigned to such experiences, the plausibility of these meaning systems for ordering existence, and one’s interaction with a significant reference group” (Thumma 1981, p.334-35).

Thumma (1981) notes that not all individuals’ self-concepts are guided by strong core identities and not all individuals seek to maintain self-consistency. Certain roles and social
contexts, however, encourage strong core identities; stigmatized identities often become core
identities (Goffman 1963). Hart and Richardson (1981) found that gay men often organize their
self-concepts around their sexual identities. Religious identities also often become core
identities. The ideologies and practices of many religions encourage self-concepts organized
around the religious identity. The religious identity becomes the lens through which all other
identities are viewed (Gecas 1981). Thus, the experience of conflicting core identities, such as a
Christian identity and a lesbigay identity, may pose a serious crisis of meaning to the individual.
Such crises result in attempts to restore meaning and reduce internal conflict (Berger 1967). By
examining the experience of lesbigay Christians, we can explore how individuals with such
conflicting core identities attempt to resolve the conflict.
PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON LESBIGAY CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES

Only recently, in the last 15 years or so, has research been conducted on lesbigay Christian identity. Thumma (1991) studied members of Good News, which functions to minister to lesbigay evangelicals with the purpose of helping them negotiate their identities. He found that the identity conflict experienced by lesbigay Christians motivates them to negotiate identity congruence between their sexual and religious identities, particularly through the means of adopting a critical historical approach to interpreting the Bible. Good News teaches members the “proper” interpretation of the Bible, which does not include condemnation of homosexuality, but rather a message of God’s love for all people. The success of Good News comes from their socialization of members into a new identity that involves the integration of the lesbigay identity and the Christian identity. Thumma found that those who were more successful in integrating their sexual and religious identities were also those who more fully internalize the teachings of Good News.

Mahaffy (1996) studied lesbians who previously or currently identify with Christianity in some way and who either left the Church or attempted to integrate their lesbian and Christian identities. She based her study on the Dissonance Theory Model, which states that when cognitive dissonance is attributed to the self it leads to a motivation to reduce the dissonance, which is then followed by a dissonance reducing change in cognition. Some participants in Mahaffy’s study reported no feelings of conflict between their homosexuality and Christianity (27%). However, of the participants who did report cognitive dissonance, 58% of the 163 self-identified lesbians reported having created greater congruency between their lesbian identity and their Christian identity. They reported that their increased congruency came about through reading about other lesbigay Christians’ experiences, meeting other lesbigay Christians,
participating in therapy, distinguishing between religion and spirituality, or disregarding the
Bible passages that condemn homosexuality and instead focusing on the beliefs and traditions of
Christianity that are affirming.

Mahaffy (1996) also found that among the lesbian Christians who reported cognitive
dissonance, 35% attributed the source of the dissonance to the self and 38% attributed the source
of the dissonance to others. Examining the effects of age at becoming a Christian on the
relationship between the type of dissonance (internal or external) and the type of resolution
(altering cognitions or leaving the Church), Mahaffy found that those with internal dissonance
were more likely to alter their cognitions than leave the Church, unless individuals became
Christians during adulthood. In that case, most did not leave the church or use cognitive methods
to make their identities congruent. They either lived with the internal conflict or their method of
conflict resolution was unknown to Mahaffy. In contrast, the later in life a woman began to
identify as a lesbian, the more likely she was to change her beliefs or leave the church altogether.

Yip (1997) found that when lesbigay Christians experience identity conflict, they may
resolve it in a variety of ways. Specifically, when they feel condemned by the Church, they may
challenge the traditional theologies of the Church regarding homosexuality. This is done by
arguing that the passages in the Bible that are used to condemn homosexuality are
misinterpreted, challenging the applicability and relevance of these specific passages and shifting
the focus from the specific passages to larger Christian principles. Other strategies of identity
conflict resolution include arguing that the Church should not judge morality, or paralleling
lesbigay relationships to marriage. Another method of decreasing the conflict is to increase
individualism. Yip concluded that lesbigay Christians may decrease their identity conflict by
forming their own religious ideals and concepts instead of adhering to organized religious beliefs.

In another study Yip (1998) concluded that most Christian gay men dichotomize the Christian community in terms of homophobia. Most of his respondents thought of the Catholic Church, as a whole, as very homophobic. The local Catholic Church, however, was thought to be understanding and open to change. In another study, Yip (1998) found that participating in attempts to change the Church’s stance on homosexuality and fighting against homophobia are also helpful in reducing the identity conflict experienced by many lesbigay Christians.

In Rodriguez and Ouellette’s study (2000) of the role of a Metropolitan Community Church\(^3\) in helping participants integrate their lesbigay and Christian identities, 72% of the 40 participants in their study reported their lesbian or gay and Christian identities as absent of any conflict. Most of them attributed their identity congruence to becoming more involved with their church, reading relevant literature, and talking with others, with involvement in the church being most significantly related to identity congruence. Those that reported identity congruence were also significantly more likely to be open about their sexual orientation and older in age. Rodriguez and Oullette found no significant relationship between identity congruence and the church denomination in which an individual was raised. They also found that lesbians, compared to gay men, were more likely to obtain identity congruence.

In her study of individualism among lesbigay Christians, Wilcox (2002) concluded that without the stability and coherence that individualization brings to their religious and sexual identities, lesbigay Christians would not be able to create identity congruence between their sexual and religious identities. Wilcox found that lesbigay Christians have non-traditional views

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\(^3\) The United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches is a denomination specifically geared for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. More detailed information about UFMCC will be discussed in a subsequent section.
of the Bible; they do not view it as infallible, rather lesbigay Christians apply what they think is accurate and helpful and disregard what they think is not. Wilcox also found that many lesbigay Christians adopt a view of God as a non-gendered being. They may relate to God as a parent, rather than a father figure. God is rarely viewed as judgmental, angry, or vindictive. Instead, God is viewed as loving and accepting. This sort of understanding of God has many implications for lesbigay Christians according to Wilcox. She concludes that a loving and accepting God can be a great help for lesbigay Christians during and after the coming out process. This view of God can lead lesbigay Christians to conclude that God loves everyone and is present in all relationships, not just heterosexual relationships.

Lukenbill (1998) and Wilcox (2002) both found that the teachings of essentialism in gay-affirming churches play a big part in reducing the conflict between the Christian and lesbigay identities. Essentialism is the belief that we are born with identities; they are not chosen or formed. Believing that God created lesbigay people the way they are—that homosexuality is not chosen or a result of social circumstances, enables lesbigay Christians to decrease self-blame and guilt through the rationale that God must approve of their lesbigay identity as the creator of it (Wilcox 2002).

Drumm (2005) conducted a study with 57 members of Kinship, a ministry to lesbigay Seventh-day Adventists. Kinship’s mission is to help lesbigay Christians integrate their sexual and religious identities. Participants, all of whom were raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, reported going through a time of identity conflict. Participants first tried to resolve the conflict by denying their homosexual feelings or trying to change them. Drumm identified five methods participants used in attempts to reject their sexual orientation: denial, religious participation, psychotherapy, pursuit of heterosexual relationships, and suicide attempts. After an
initial attempt to ignore or change their homosexual feelings, participants began attempting to create identity congruence. Kinship aided in their identity congruence by providing new role models (other lesbigay Seventh-day Adventists), a new understanding of the Bible, a new view of God as more loving and accepting, and a new understanding of God’s commandments about homosexuality.

It is important to note that many of the methods used by lesbigay Christians to create identity congruence are not unique to lesbigay Christians. For example, individualism is a common characteristic of many Protestant traditions (Weber 1958). What is significant, however, is the way that lesbigay Christians use individualism to aid in their identity congruence. How such mechanisms are used to create identity congruence is what is of particular interest, not the presence of the mechanisms themselves.

The previous research is limited in that there is a lack of consideration for how lesbigay Christians create identity congruence within a religious community. Based on the previous research, we know little about the direct role a religious community has in shaping lesbigay Christian identity and aiding in identity congruence: Thumma (1991) recognized how Good News socializes its members into new identities. He concludes that the more members internalize their teachings the more their lesbigay and Christian identities are congruent. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found that members of gay-affirming churches experience more identity congruence when they are involved with their church and Mahaffy (1996) and Drumm (2005) identify relationships with other lesbigay Christians as increasing identity congruence.

Other mechanisms lesbigay Christians use to create identity congruence that previous literature has identified include adopting a different approach to interpreting the Bible (Thumma 1991, Wilcox 2002, Drumm 2005), disregarding passages of the Bible that condemn

Based on these findings it is unclear how participation in a community directly aids in members’ identity congruence. Of course, many of the mechanisms listed above are often encouraged by and can take place within a religious community. However, they are also mechanisms that individuals can and often utilize on their own, apart from a religious setting.

What is missing from these previous studies is a consideration for the role of religious ritual in aiding lesbigay Christians to create identity congruence. Because the previous research is based primarily on analysis of interviews and questionnaires, little consideration is given to what takes place during the church services and how those events contribute to identity congruence. By not examining the role of ritual we are missing what is being “said” through that major aspect of the religious community that is not otherwise communicated (Anderson and Foley 1998). Examining both ritual and narratives are necessary to understanding how participation in a gay-affirming religious community aids in lesbigay Christian identity congruence.
ANALYTIC STRATEGIC

Rituals and Narratives

Durkheim (1957) recognized that religion is not merely a system of beliefs that make people think. He viewed the purpose of religion as “to make us act, [and] to aid us to live” (p.416). According to Durkheim, divine knowledge is not the only difference between a believer and a non-believer; the main difference is how religion functions in the believer’s life to equip him or her to overcome life’s trials. The believer feels stronger through religion. However, Durkheim argued, belief in and desire for a sacred object is not enough to receive the benefit of religion; one must place themselves under the influence of that sacred object. This is done through ritual. Ritual creates and recreates faith. Durkheim regarded ritual as key to receiving the benefits of religion. He asserted that the influences of religion cannot be felt unless the believers are “assembled together and act in common” (1957, p.418).

Anderson and Foley (1998) conceptualized ritual as a telling of stories. Rituals tell the story of both the community and the individual. Rituals enable participants to “[forge] an identification with some particular family, tribe or other segment of humanity” (1998, p.23). Rituals also provide an important setting for members to establish an independent and particular identity within the group, by allowing individuals to integrate their personal stories into a larger story (Anderson and Foley 1998). Driver (1998) states that rituals not only reflect the social order, they create it. The order created by rituals is partly established through the acceptance of the order by those who participate in the ritual.

Anderson and Foley (1998) pointed out that each ritual has three levels of meaning. The “official meaning” is the meaning of the ritual given by the originators of the ritual or the meaning according to official experts. Anderson and Foley described the “public meaning” of the
ritual as the meaning which would be obvious if one were to observe the ritual. The “private meaning” is the personal significance particular participants find in the ritual.

However, as meaning-laden as rituals are, rituals do not only create reality and make meaning; they are “essential and powerful means for making the world a habitable and hospitable place” (Anderson and Foley 1998, p.22). Rituals are beneficial in that they help create a sense of continuity in peoples’ lives by linking the past to the present and the present to the future. In the midst of life’s uncertainties, the repetition of rituals can be a source of security and comfort for participants. Driver (1998) similarly states that rituals create communities of love by bringing people together, uniting them emotionally. Rituals often provide a space for love to be expressed and felt by participants. Furthermore, according to Driver, the ritual symbols often provide group members with a sense of a larger, universal love.

Ritual is also an arena for identity negotiation. Hughes-Freeland and Crain (1998) noted that ritual is not just form and meaning; it is a process that involves agency and intentionality. In ritual there is a tension between creativity and constraint. They argued that ritual is most usefully and relevantly theorized as a space for social change and identity politics. They noted that minorities often use ritual to affirm their own identities and speak to outsiders.

According to Driver (1998) we can only appreciate the full power of ritual when we view it from the perspective of the marginalized, those who have little social power, those in need of a transformation of the social structure. Ritual can be seen as replacing unwanted laws and compelled obedience with spontaneity, affection, and unity. When this is the condition, rituals hold transformative power, both within the individual and within society. Rituals enable participants to envision a new order in the world, according to Driver.
Driver (1998) specifically addressed the ritual of Holy Communion, noting the freedom of Christ that the sacraments embody. He argued that Holy Communion is not suppose to be a passive consumption of God’s grace, rather Holy Communion should provide a space for participants to work with God in a movement against all injustice and oppression. In this case the Sacraments signify a social and spiritual liberation. Holy Communion can be defined as “an action of God together with the people of God, ritually performed to celebrate freedom and to hasten the liberation of the whole world” (Driver 1998, p. 207).

Analysis of ritual alone is not enough to understand the complex nature of how participation in a religious community influences identity processes; narratives must also be examined. Anderson and Foley (1998) recognized the interconnectedness of ritual and narrative. Both are significant ways through which people make meaning. Narrative theorists, Gergen and Gergen (1988) emphasized the importance of narrative in identity formation. Stories are a “critical means by which we make ourselves intelligible within the social world” (1988, p. 17). They also noted that narratives are not individually constructed, but socially constructed. Like ritual, narratives tie together the past, present, and future, making it all one coherent story (McAdams 1989).

Just as a ritual can be described as “an imaginative and interpretive act through which we express and create meaning in our lives,” (Anderson and Foley 1998, p.26) a narrative can be described as imaginative and interpretive story through which we express and create meaning in our lives. Because both the rituals and narratives of lesbigay Christians have something to tell us, I will examine the dynamics of both within a particular lesbigay religious community. I will specifically examine how communion ritual is used to create and maintain a lesbigay Christian
identity and how the participants understand and discuss the significance of communion as it relates to their self identities.

The United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

The religious community in which I have conducted this study is a part of the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC). Founded in 1968 by Troy Perry, who felt called by God to begin a church for “gay men, lesbians, and other outcasts” (Cherry 1994) the UFMCC is made up primarily of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

In 1968 Troy Perry, as a defrocked Church of God minister, placed an advertisement in one of Los Angeles’ gay magazines. The first service of twelve took place on October 6, 1968 in Perry’s home. The church grew so rapidly that in just four years after Perry’s magazine advertisement, there were 35 congregations in 19 states (Wilcox 2001). UFMCC continues to grow at an impressive rate with now close to 300 congregations in 22 countries.

UFMCC has been greatly influenced by liberation theology, which began in the Catholic churches of Central and South America in the 1960s. As a theological movement that stressed the rights of the poor, liberation theology was soon adopted by many African Americans and other minorities that were fighting for civil rights. The influence of liberation theology can be seen in UFMCC today through their emphasis on political involvement, specifically gay rights. Ecumenicity and inclusivity also play a role in UFMCC’s vision. UFMCC attempts to be a place where all rejected groups are welcome (Wilcox 2001).

Some church members have likened Perry and other UFMCC leaders to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his fight for civil rights. They have described the oppression of lesbigay persons as similar in nature to that of African Americans prior to the Civil Rights Movement. Perry is often thought of by UFMCC members as a divinely appointed leader sent by God to lead
lesbigay people out of the “desert” of oppression much like Moses led his people out of Egypt (Wilcox 2001).

I conducted this study with a UFMCC church because of the intentionality of UFMCC to provide a safe place for lesbigay people to explore what it means to be a lesbigay Christian, giving lesbigay Christians the space, resources, and supportive community needed to develop more congruent identities. UFMCC is a place where lesbigay Christians with varying levels of identity conflict can come together to create what it means to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual and Christian. Because identities are not set, changing over time in response to differing social environments and others’ reflected appraisals, individuals are always in a process of assessing, affirming or redefining who they are, especially in the face of discrimination. Even though not every member of UFMCC has experienced internal identity conflict, because of the conflicting social meanings of the lesbigay identity and the Christian identity, lesbigay Christians are forced to engage in the process of reconciling these two identities and developing a shared understanding of what it means to be a lesbigay Christian. As the main context in which the process of identity congruence takes place for lesbigay Christians, UFMCC provides the symbolic language, the system of discourse, the theology, and the ritual necessary for the process of identity congruence to take place.

New Life Metropolitan Community Church

The particular Metropolitan Community church in which I conducted this study will be referred to as “New Life.” At the time of data collection, New Life had roughly 50 members\(^4\) in attendance each Sunday. The church also held a Wednesday evening service, with 15 or so members in attendance. However, during the course of my data collection this service was

\(^4\) I use the term “member” in reference to those who attend New Life, not necessarily those who are recognized as official members by New Life.
cancelled and replaced with two small groups. One small group consisted of the pastor, Reverend “Michelle”\textsuperscript{5}, and four other members who each desired to “live out” what they believe on a daily basis and thus met every Wednesday for an hour to hold each other accountable to that end. The other small group I observed was a book discussion on *The Sins of Scripture* by John Shelby Spong. This group had seven or so participants and met every Wednesday for one and a half hours. Facilitated by one of the lay leaders in the church, this group discussed the chapter they had read that week, raising questions to one another and sharing opinions.

At the time of data collection, this mostly white, working- and middle-class, middle-aged congregation was pastored by a middle-aged lesbian, who had graduated from a Methodist seminary. She graciously agreed to let me observe, take notes, conduct focus groups, and ask many questions. As far as I was aware, all regular attendees of New Life were lesbian, gay, or bisexual except two straight women who were pointed out to me by another member. New Life is located in a large Midwestern city and during the time of my field research, met close to downtown in an old, beautiful stone church building that was rented from a dissolved Episcopal Church.

**Method**

Prior to the design of the study I conducted a two-month long pilot study in order to gain a better understanding of how this religious community enabled these lesbigay Christians to explore and construct their identities. Six months later I returned for another two months to examine more specifically how participation in the communion ritual aided in members’ process of identity congruence. I observed many Sunday services, Wednesday services, and Wednesday night small groups. I interviewed Reverend Michelle and conducted three focus groups.

\textsuperscript{5} This pseudonym reflects how members of New Life referred to their pastor. They also frequently just called her by her first name.
Communion was celebrated in every Sunday and Wednesday service. By observing the church services I was able to see the public meaning of the ritual, perhaps not otherwise verbalized by participants (Anderson and Foley 1998) and by interviewing the pastor I was able to gain insight into the official meanings of the ritual (see Appendix A for interview guide questions). Focus groups were an ideal way to obtain the meanings participants attached to the communion ritual and how they perceived it as significant to their self identity. Such qualitative methods preserved the context in which these identity processes took place (Krueger 1993, 1998).

I recruited participants for the focus groups through research information sheets (see Appendix B) and a notice in the Sunday bulletin. Reverend Michelle announced my presence as a researcher and my need for volunteers during the first two services I attended. Those interested in learning more about the study or interested in participating in a focus group were directed to pick up an information sheet from me after the service. Those interested in participating signed-up for a focus group according to the day and time scheduled.

Each focus group consisted of four to six participants. Between the three focus groups, there were 14 participants total with one individual participating in two groups. I utilized the first focus group, conducted during the pilot study, to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants’ self-identities and their perceptions of how participation in their church influences their self-identities. I utilized the other two focus groups to specifically get at the meanings participants attach to the communion ritual and how they perceive the ritual as influencing their self-concepts. These two focus groups were guided by seven main open-ended questions (see Appendix C). Each focus group took place at the church and was approximately two hours long.

All focus groups and the interview with Michelle were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Consent was obtained prior to the focus groups and the interview (see Appendix D).

Communion and baptism are the two sacraments New Life and UFMCC recognize.
Confidentiality of the participants was assured (see Appendix E) and maintained, and all other requirements of the Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board were followed. The quality and validity of the data gathered through focus groups were ensured through adhering to strict methodological procedures for focus groups as outlined by Krueger (1993, 1998).

During the observations of the Sunday service, limited notes were taken with permission from the Pastor. Special attention was given to the details of the communion ritual. After each observation I wrote out full, detailed notes as soon as possible. Because of the smaller group size, no notes were taken during my observations of the Wednesday service and Wednesday small groups in order to remain as unobtrusive as possible and prevent members from feeling inhibited in their sharing. Instead, full notes were immediately written out from memory.

During the months of data collection, the members of New Life accepted me into their community without hesitation. They talked with me and joked with me as if I was a fellow member. Just as many members greeted one another with big hugs each week, they did so with me as well. One participant explained how he felt like I belonged to their community and would be sad to see me leave. He insisted that I come back to visit frequently. My acceptance into their community allowed me to gain more of an “insiders” perspective, having access to information and conversations that I might not have been privy to as a researcher in a less welcoming environment.
RESULTS

Through the analysis of both ritual and narrative, six major themes emerged from the data. These were: communion as demonstrating full love and acceptance, communion as tolerance of religious diversity, communion as celebrating individualistic spirituality, communion as creating a sense of belonging, communion as affirming same-sex partnership, and communion as an act of social justice. I will discuss how each of these central themes was experienced by the lesbigay Christians in my study through their participation in the ritual act of communion and the positive influence each has in helping their process of identity congruence.

No one aspect of a community or a ritual is distinct enough from another to be understood outside the context of the whole, thus the main findings are extremely intertwined with one another and cannot be fully understood each on their own. However, for the organizational purposes of this thesis I will discuss each of these major findings separately with the recognition of their inseparability in the context of the community from which they were abstracted.

Additionally, the way members of New Life utilize the communion ritual to aid in creating more congruent lesbigay Christian identities is not easily understood without first understanding the participants’ feelings of rejection from mainstream Christianity. All of the participants indicated feeling discriminated against by the Church. Most began their Christian experience in a non-lesbigay church and eventually left because of discrimination, not feeling welcome, or realizing that their sexual orientation “was not compatible” with the theology of the church:

I got thoroughly upset with the Methodist Church. They did not like the idea that I wanted my minister there to do a Holy Union. They squelched it in a way that I found it very offensive and I said I’m done with the straight church.

Participants used “Church” to refer to mainstream Christian denominations and churches, which are seen as mostly anti-gay. The participants used “Church” and “Straight Church” synonymously.
After about 30 years or so of actually being a member of [a straight] church I finally had the last straw when they had their last General Assembly and they just reemphasized, or made even a little more strict, their stupidity about my being incompatible with Christianity…Its how their book goes, their…Book of Discipline. At that point I decided that now’s the time to officially make the move.

Because of the discrimination of the Church, participants have rather negative attitudes toward the Church, describing it as non-accepting, intolerant, and hateful. One participant became very emotional as she talked about her experience as a closeted lesbian in a non-accepting church.

Through her tears she said:

I’ve served these people all my life. I do not deserve [it]. And I do take it personally, because I am gay! How can you not take it personal? This is your life they’re talking about. They don’t have to use you name, they don’t have to point a finger in your face, but they’re talking about a group that you’re a part of.

Even straight churches that call themselves “gay affirming” are often not considered to really be so. One participant explained this by imitating a conversation he had with his father, who was the pastor of a supposed “gay-affirming” church:

My dad was like, ‘Well we’re gay affirming here. We got a gay couple. They sit in the back and never hold hands!’ I had never heard him actually say the G-word or anything in any of his services or anything, but once he actually went so far as to say something about “other persuasions.” Ya know he went THAT close to say ‘orientation’ or something. But that is not affirming. And this is my experience with the straight church. They don’t want to hear about it, they don’t want to see it. And if that couple in the back starts holding hands, people start squirming. And that’s the reason why I don’t really have anything to do with the straight church because they need to get over themselves.

Not only were such feelings of rejection very common, but many participants also reported having at some point internalized the rejection, believing that they were indeed sinful.

I used to pray…for hours, crying to the Lord to, you know, when I was going to the Pentecostal church, to deliver me from this demon of lust, deliver me from this demon of homosexuality. And I was sincere, but the deliverance never happened.

Some participants even believed they were condemned to hell. One gay man in his thirties explained that as a young boy in the Catholic Church he did not take communion because he believed he was going to hell for his homosexuality. He stopped going to church altogether when he was 14 years old because, he said, “I didn’t want to go to hell and I didn’t want to be told I was going to hell.”
New Life sees its primary purpose as a direct response to this kind of rejection from mainstream Christianity. The church leaders and members attempt to create a loving and welcoming community where all people, particularly lesbigay people, can find “healing and wholeness.” New Life creates the space and provides the tools necessary for members to reconstruct their identities, attempting to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation. One such way New Life aids in this process of identity congruence is through the communion ritual.

Communion as Demonstrating Full Acceptance and Love

The first major finding was that communion acts as a “touch point” with God, through which members feel fully accepted and loved by God. Participants frequently spoke of the unconditional love of God, noting that God’s love for them enables them to love and accept themselves. Participants explained that God loves everyone regardless of their identity or behavior. This kind of unconditional love and acceptance was not only demonstrated through the communion ritual, according to participants it was also experienced through participation in the communion ritual. Aware of the power communion has in enabling lesbigay Christians to feel loved and accepted, New Life intentionally offers communion every Sunday. Reverend Michelle explained:

Part of the reason we do [communion] every week has to do with the fact that for so long LGBT people were refused communion if they were known to be gay or suspected to be gay in Catholic churches, or in some of the more strict Protestant denominations. They were turned away from the table and so we…make sure we offer it every week as a healing for people who may have been turned away. We also recognize that somewhere in the mystery of the sacrament there is a healing and a power of presence that um, frankly you can’t get enough of, and so why only do it once a quarter?...[We] let God bless as much as possible in it. But the practical thing for MCC is so many of our folks have been turned away that we want to um offer that to the—as often as possible, as a healing gesture to folks who’ve been hurt.

Many participants reported experiencing the “mystery of the sacrament” that the Reverend described, often times feeling God’s love come over them during the act of communion. One man struggled for words to describe how he feels free from his worries and “baggage” when he experiences God’s gift of love. He explained:
Um, well for me it may sound a little odd, but I feel sometimes, while am sitting there on my seat, and [Michelle] says 'This cup is provided for you, for all people,' that I just feel like a part of me I leave in my seat (my ‘baggage’ maybe). And then as I go for communion and receive communion, it’s just something coming up within me and its ‘aaah!’ [a deep sigh of relief]. I wish I could describe further. It’s, I feel lighter, umm, but it’s too intimate to describe.

Another participant described how overwhelmed she can become during communion when she dwells on God’s love for her and what Christ did for her, as symbolized by the ritual:

It’s something very personal to me because it’s not just communion…It’s knowing that I have access. Sometimes I sit out for communion because it’s overwhelming to sit there and think about that. It is. Sometimes it’s a joy, and sometimes…it can be overwhelming to, uh, sit there and be thinking about it and just not have my legs work when the time comes to stand up or not. So it can be extremely personal to the point where I don’t even get up and walk to the front. But I’m already there.

New Life practices an “open table” approach to communion. When inviting the congregation to come forward and receive the “gifts” (the wafer and grape juice symbolizing the body and blood of Christ), the pastor would explain, “You don’t have to be a member of this church or any church to receive communion. If you feel led, then come.” In discussing how participants felt God’s love for them through the open table, one woman said that the purpose of communion is that “Christ came and communicated a message of love and equality.” Others in the group nodded in agreement.

Some participants indicated that they sometimes have a difficult time remembering that they are loved and accepted by God as lesbigay people. One woman said that she sometimes refrained from participating in communion when she felt unworthy to receive from God. After she expressed her occasional feelings of unworthiness, the rest of the focus group participants quickly assured her of God’s acceptance of her. One participant responded with:

I don’t see any reason at all not to come forward to take the Lord’s Table and to receive the blessings and the strength and the reconnection with that relationship. I would think that…the only thing that will keep you from coming forward for the Lord’s table [is that] sometimes we are our worst enemies…and [we] accuse ourselves…As GLBTQ people particularly, we are made to feel unworthy by those around us. God says “You know I am greater than your heart, even though your heart condemns you. This is the lost sheep and you are mine. Come forth,” you know.
Another aspect of communion that demonstrates God’s love and equality to members of New Life is the allowance of anyone to officiate and serve communion. The UFMCC does not hold strict guidelines in the distinction between clergy and laypersons. Reverend Michelle explained that it is important for New Life to allow laypeople to fill roles traditionally reserved for clergy in order to demonstrate their acceptance of everyone. Michelle explained how New Life has intentionally created opportunities for members to officiate communion who would not typically be considered worthy enough to do so:

It’s just this sense that, you know, when we say everyone is welcome, we mean everyone is welcome at every level of participation. And that makes some people very nervous. Some of the folks who grew up in really strict sort of ‘you have to believe in Jesus to get into heaven and, you know, no smoking, no drinking,…big into lots of rules’ [churches], get really bent out of shape when somebody dressed in their leather gear goes up there to celebrate communion for instance. And we have been to conferences where we do that on purpose. We have a night that’s like “leather people among us night.” And so everybody whose into leather will wear, not necessarily like what they would, you know, in the total heat of the moment, but, you know, they’ll wear leather hats or chaps or something, you know…But then, as those people, you know, participate, preach, celebrate communion or whatever, you kind of see people go “Ooo, I, my, I have to get over this.

Just as members of New Life see God’s love as not dependent on who they are; that God loves absolutely everyone, they also see God’s love as not dependent on what they do. This kind of acceptance, as demonstrated in communion, seemed to especially resonate with members with Catholic backgrounds. One woman described her newly felt freedom to receive communion at New Life.

Before, in Catholic Church, only people who didn’t break rules could receive communion. Not people who were divorced, etc. Now, I’m thinking that I have so much freedom—I can walk up with [my partner] and can accept the sacrament with no pretense. It’s not like I’m a good person and therefore I can accept it.

Two participants explained how Jesus came to show people that “it’s all about love, love, love” and not about following rules. One participant described the problem with the Church’s interpretation of the Bible as being too focused on the laws themselves rather than the intention and purpose of the laws. Another participant explained that the laws of the Bible no longer apply because “Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets and nailed the commandments to the cross...
with the law and himself and gave new commandments.” That scripture was frequently quoted by participants, along with the “new commandments” it refers to: “Love the Lord your God with all you heart and all your soul and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” Because they see God’s love as not dependent on obedience to rules, members of New Life described the open table approach to communion as a more appropriate reflection of the heart of Christianity compared to the approach of other churches.

Believing in God’s unconditional love and acceptance and experiencing it through communion allows these lesbigay Christians to love and accept themselves. Because participants have been repeatedly told that God does not love them or cannot love them, believing otherwise can sometimes difficult. However, participants recognize that accepting God’s love is vital to their acceptance of themselves. Many participants reported eventually coming to a realization that the discrimination of the Church is not reflective of God’s attitude toward them. Distinguishing between the Church and God allowed participants to see that God has loved them all along even when the Church did not:

And so [there’s] this sense that God does love us anyway, this sense of grace that has overridden all the people who’ve tried to put rules and you know, told us we’re bad…There’s still this sense that God never gave up on us even when the church did.

I got to a place where I saw I was not getting anywhere and walked away believing I was being condemned to hell. It was a long journey back, but one of the things that kept me…was knowing that one of the greatest sins that I had was doubting God’s love.

Story after story, participants shared about how they were able to finally accept their lesbigay identity once they realized God’s unconditional love for them was not dependent on their identity or behavior:

[I] finally came the realization that it’s okay. This is who I am and an integral part of me. And [my sexual orientation] does not exclude my relationship to God and my love for God and God’s love for me. And it’s part of who I am. It’s not something I’ve chosen [in order] to rebel against God, it’s not something I’ve chosen because I’ve been molested, …it is part of me. It is part of my being and it doesn’t separate me from God.
I didn’t accept my sexuality until I was 50 years old and I got a spiritual kick in the behind from the Lord and realized I needed to accept myself as God created me. I accepted myself as a gay Christian man.

One participant shared that not only did realizing God’s love help him accept his sexuality, but the acceptance of his own sexuality brought him closer to God. He said, “God gave me my sexuality. In fact, my sexuality and my struggling with my sexuality is what brought me to God.”

The love and acceptance from God as communicated and experienced through the communion ritual to heal the hurt lesbigay Christians feel from the Church’s rejection. Because rejection from the Church is the main obstacle to self-acceptance for lesbigay Christians, the communion experience as an experience of unconditional love enables lesbigay Christians to accept their sexuality and no longer see it as at odds with their relationship to God.

Communion as Tolerant of Religious Diversity

The second major finding was that members of New Life see communion as a demonstrative act of tolerance for religious diversity. In addition to their belief that God’s love is not dependent on one’s identity or behavior, members also believe that God’s love does not depend on one’s religious belief. As people who have experienced rejection from the Church, members of New Life find it especially important to not judge or discriminate against those who have different religious beliefs, both outside and within Christianity. The open table approach and the incorporation of many denominational traditions demonstrate this belief, making communion at New Life uniquely tolerant of religious differences.

Because she feels that God lets people make their own decisions, Reverend Michelle believes that it is not her place to tell church members what to believe. Instead she sees her responsibility as encouraging people to decide for themselves what they believe. Michelle explained how she attempts to communicate God’s love to everyone, not just Christians through the open table of communion. During the invitation to receive the gifts, Michelle sometimes said
something like: “and even if you don’t know or aren’t sure what you believe, if you desire to receive, you are welcome.”

One participant explained how the open table communicates love and acceptance to all people regardless of their religion. He explained that: “Christ showed love and respect to everyone, not just the Jews” and thus “the Christ message of love, and even his depth of forgiveness and a closer walk with God, is still beyond just Christians.” In sync with this belief, some participants thought that Jesus was not the only messenger from God; that God had sent many prophets around the world to bring the message of love to everyone. One woman referred to this idea as a “continuous Christ.” Many participants believe that the God they worship is the same divine being of all religions, just with different names and understood through different cultural perspectives. One participant explained how it is not his place to judge others’ religious beliefs:

I guess to me spirituality is a relationship with the inner you and the divine in whatever form someone views the divine. That may sound strange coming from a Christian, but along my spiritual journey… I’ve come to the place in my life to where I don’t feel I am able to look down on someone who isn’t a Christian and maybe not look down on someone if they don’t acknowledge God as I acknowledge God or envision God to be.

New Life’s tolerance for religious differences not only applies to various religions, but also to various denominational beliefs. This was also evident during the communion ritual. Because members of New Life come from many denominational backgrounds and experiences, one of the goals of the church is to provide services that draw on many religious traditions, so everyone feels welcome. Reverend Michelle explained that communion intentionally involves elements from various traditions “because we want folks who are Episcopal, or Catholic, or Lutheran to have some piece of the service that looks a little bit more like where they came from.” For example, Michelle explained that even though most of the members do not regard the altar as more holy and sacred than any other space, some member might regard it as such, and
thus the acolytes are asked to bow before the altar out of respect for members from “high church” traditions. Because they regard the meanings behind the act as significant, not the act itself, such formalities surrounding communion were seen as unnecessary by Michelle and most members of New Life. However, they felt it necessary to uphold all the formalities of the communion ritual for the sake of those who find them essential to the communion experience.

Recognizing the intentionality and importance of incorporating various denominational traditions into the communion ritual, one participant explained how she was willing to be a bit uncomfortable with the elements that are not so familiar to her:

In the communion piece of the service, it is written in itself to include different religious background. So there are things from backgrounds that I had never seen. I think that’s probably done on purpose, from some committee who would have the background to bring the input. I’m not really sure what all of them are; I could only identify my own…I recognize that there are pieces of the communion liturgy and service itself that other people seem to resonate with more than I do. It’s very foreign to me, but I just accept it and then something that might annoy you might resonate with me.

Participants explained that because New Life is the only place where they are completely welcomed and accepted, they are “basically stuck” with each other. One participant said:

When you bring the Pentecostals and the Catholics and the Methodists and the atheists [together], you’re kinda stuck together because you’re stuck with each other. Like they used to say you’re stuck with family or whatever.

As a marginalized group, lesbigay Christians are not afforded the luxury of dividing themselves into denominations based on theological belief. One participant put it this way:

When there are so many denominations that appeal to the mainstream, you can separate out like that and you can go to your speaking in tongues and you can go to your not speaking in tongues. You can go to your snake handling and your not snake handling. But, in our experience, we’re kinda stuck with each other.

More specifically, as a marginalized group who has experienced oppression and discrimination from the Church, participants explained how they feel that their religious differences are insignificant compared to the common goal of creating a safe place of worship for everyone:

We are truly a house of worship for all people. We offer to all people, in general, and offer to GLBTQ people in particular, a safe, supportive and affirming place to worship the Lord without fear of discrimination or bigotry.
Not only do denominational differences become insignificant in light of members’ high motivation to create a safe and nonjudgmental space for the gay community, accepting differences and creating room for a variety of beliefs is necessary for the accomplishment of this goal. However, participants admitted that tolerating each other’s differences can be difficult at times. One participant said:

“Differences is one of the things gay churches have had to do because we come from so many different places...and sometimes we’re not all that good about it.”

Another participant explained that because members of New Life do not have all things in common, “sometimes it can make it hard to communicate or to sometimes feel comfortable.”

However, members are very willing to sacrifice belonging to a church with a shared theology for just merely belonging. Though it is challenging for members to be in a religious community with people who hold differing religious beliefs, many described the diversity as a positive opportunity. One participant explained:

“Because we have been damaged by the churches that we came from, and especially in today’s political atmosphere where it seems like the GLBT people are the current whipping boy of the religious right and all this other stuff. We’ve been discriminated against, singled out, some of us have even been physically bashed, mentally bashed, whatever. I think what we bring to the table, from our unique religious and spiritual backgrounds, is an attempt to move away from that and be accepting and be open. Yeah, I’m used to doing it this way, but there’s nothing wrong with doing it this [other] way. You know, let’s experience the Lord in a different, new way, a different manner. And I think we’re accepting of like a happy combination of everything.

During a theological debate between members of the weekly book discussion, another participant enthusiastically said:

“The thing I like about this church is everyone is so different. Everyone comes from a variety of backgrounds. It makes it so interesting to come to church!”

The acceptance of religious diversity and individualism not only makes New Life an interesting church to attend, it creates the environment in which lesbigay Christians are free to express their identities as they reconstruct their meanings. The way New Life does communion both creates and clearly demonstrates this acceptance of all religious beliefs.
The tolerance of all religious beliefs and theologies, through the lack of any belief requirement to participate in communion and the incorporation of traditions from various denominations into the communion liturgy, enables all lesbigay individuals to receive the healing love and acceptance from God through communion. By making communion welcoming and comfortable for everyone, New Life is providing an opportunity for all lesbigay Christians to feel loved and accepted regardless of their denominational background. This also enables lesbigay individuals the opportunity to explore their identities at the various stages in the congruency process, even when the Christian identity is not very salient.

Communion as Celebrating Individualistic Spirituality

The third major finding was that communion at New Life demonstrates members’ celebratory attitude toward individualistic spirituality. The different ways to actively participate in communion create space for individuals to express their spirituality however they choose. Even though communion at New Life is a shared experience that unites members as one body, participants felt that communion is at the same time very private and personal, each attaching different personal meanings to their communion experiences. Creating room for individuals to express and understand their spirituality in ways unique to them, communion at New Life enables lesbigay Christians to explore identity congruence and be comfortable with where they are at in the process of doing so.

Each Sunday during “The Invitation to the Table,” Reverend Michelle explained the various ways to participate in communion and that everyone is welcome. Each week she would say something similar to what she said one particular Sunday:

My friends, you don’t have to be a member of this church or any church to receive communion. If you feel led to come forward to share in this gift, you are welcome. There is a server in the center aisle and prayer partners at the back of each side aisle. The prayer partners can take your intercessory requests or they can pray a quick blessing over you. You can also use the candles or make use of a side chapel. As soon as the servers are ready, you can come.
After this invitation, most members would stand and walk to the center aisle to receive the gifts, approach a prayer partner for prayer, go to the side chapel to receive the gifts alone, or light votives at the side altar or some combination thereof. Some members would remain seated and pray silently or stand and raise their hands to the music playing in the background. Participants appreciated the ability to engage in the communion ritual however they chose to. One woman explained:

[Communion] gives the opportunity to approach it individually in that I like the idea that you can go down the center aisle and you can take communion, you can go off to the side and take it very privately and have a prayer moment, you can have a very prayerful moment. I do like that because, you know, there are just those days that you know, you just want that little bit more solitude maybe, or you want that that privacy…So I think it’s a good thing.

Another participant said he appreciated communion at New Life for the ability to not only choose how to participate in communion, but whether to participate at all:

On an individual basis, if you want to take communion you can, if you don’t that’s fine too. If you want to get it yourself or have someone else give it to you, whichever, it’s all okay.

One woman, who is allergic to wheat gluten, explained how Michelle immediately ordered gluten-free wafers for her when she found out that was the reason why the woman did not participate in communion. The woman’s partner explained why that was so significant to them.

She said:

And I would say that comes back to respecting that individuality. I never feel like I’m lumped into a group here. It’s a sense of community, but there’s also a sense of individuality.

Communion is not only personal to members through the way they each choose to participate; it is also personal in its meanings. Though communion is a shared experience with shared symbolic meanings, most members each attach personal meanings to their communion experiences. One participant explained how the way New Life does communion allows members to personalize it:
Basically [Michelle] says, ‘You don’t have to be a member of the church. It doesn’t matter who you are. You come up here and receive the body of Christ. Period. The end. So, I think in just that couple of sentences…that demonstrates, or shows how [New Life] doesn’t interpret what communion is suppose to mean to me, or to you, you, or you [(pointing to other participants)] or to anybody.

Participants explained that even though they hear the same liturgy and engage in the same ritual, they may walk away from communion with very different interpretations of the symbolic meanings, depending on their various life experiences. One participant said:

I think it comes back to that respecting the individuality and the various religious backgrounds. [Communion] might mean something different for you than it does for me, but I can interpret it any way that God reasons that’s a wonderful freedom.

Members of New Life hold different beliefs regarding the presence of Christ in the communion gifts. Many members believe that the gifts are a memorial of Christ, symbolic of his gift of salvation. Some members believe or that Christ’s spirit is present in the gifts (consubstantiation) and a few members believe that the communion gifts actually become the body and blood of Christ upon consecration (transubstantiation). Mindful of members’ various theological beliefs, Reverend Michelle carefully words the consecration. Each Sunday she prays, “…we ask you to bless these gifts with the power of your Spirit. Cause them to be for us the very real presence of Christ, and thus gifts of life and grace.” She explained her intentions with this wording:

Actually years ago I settled on that kind of language to make space for the different kinds of personal beliefs that people held. It’s a way of acknowledging the Catholics who may still believe that it actually, that somehow it actually becomes the body and blood of Christ. Um, as well as for those of us who, you know, [don’t]. I still know it’s Welch’s, you know, it will always be Welch’s and yet it’s more than that. There is a something about it that’s special. So for some of our folks it’s totally symbolic and what I was trying to find was middle ground language. When we ask the Holy Spirit to make it for us the very really presence of Christ, that may be a spiritual thing for some people, a yes it really gets transformed thing for some people, and it may be a um, you know, sometimes a hamburger is just a hamburger and sometimes it’s a first date hamburger and so it’s different.

Participants who hold communion as a memorial and do not subscribe to consubstantiation or transubstantiation still recognized both beliefs as legitimate possibilities. Regardless of which
view they held, however, all participants agreed that the significance of communion is found in the meanings associated with the gifts, both the shared and the personal meanings.

The space that communion at New Life creates for individualistic expressions of their spirituality provides lesbigay Christians with the room to explore their identities and be comfortable with themselves and comfortable with their place in the process of identity congruence. The attachment of personal meanings to the communion ritual allows each member to experience communion in a way that is unique to their specific understanding of themselves as a lesbigay Christian.

Communion as Creating a Sense of Belonging

The fourth major finding was that communion creates a sense of belonging among members of New Life. As people who have been rejected from other religious communities and social groups, members highly value the welcoming community at New Life. Membership in a group of people with common social identities is vital to seeing one’s identity as legitimate. Additionally, community enables members to reconstruct their identities with new shared meanings. In a society that largely considers the term “gay Christian” to be an oxymoron, developing a shared understanding of what it means to be a lesbigay Christian is vital to members’ identity congruence.

The shared experience of the communion ritual and its symbolic meanings create a sense of closeness and unity among members. Not only do they participate in this ritual together week after week, they see it as representing “one bread and one body.” The symbolic act of receiving Christ’s body not only unifies members to God, but also to one another. Reverend Michelle explained the significance of communion as a shared experience and how the members actually
become the “body of Christ” through receiving the gifts. She explained her intentions during communion to make this clear so each member would know their place in the body:

I phrase [the consecration] as if it already was, you know, ‘In sharing these gifts together we become the body of Christ.’ We are we already are it, not ‘please let us be the body of Christ. It’s not a question; it’s a statement. In sharing these gifts together we become the body of Christ and we’re called to risk ourselves for others. And so, the choosing of that wording, and having everybody say it together is another way of sort of, guaranteeing that they all know their place in there.

Praying with a prayer partner during communion is another way that many members experience close connection with one another and gain a sense that they are part of “the body.” During the prayers, the prayer partner embraces the person or the couple seeking prayer. Oftentimes tears are shed and hugs are exchanged. One woman, who often acts as a prayer partner described her felt connection to the church body through the prayer partner time:

As the person who does prayer, it’s a wonderful thing to be able to pray for people, you know. It’s just an incredible thing to be able to open yourself up and to be there, and to be ‘us.’ [To] be part of the body of the church, it’s just wonderful.

Through her tears, another woman, who had just returned to New Life the day very of the focus group, shared how the sense of community she felt through communion that morning gave her a sense of purpose. She said:

And the communion today gave me a blessing of knowing that I really do have peace. And for the first the first time in a year, I feel like…I’m going in the right direction, finally. And that came from my personal relationship with the communion table, which is open…And if [New Life] didn’t have that here, I would still be lost. And I’m no longer lost. I actually found a purpose, and that community gives me that purpose…And that is my blessing that I am overjoyed with tears. I’m overjoyed with what I was given back today: my God and this church, and these wonderful people. And I love them all, and they know that!

Participants repeatedly referred to New Life as one of the most loving communities they have ever experienced. In searching for a church, one woman decided on New Life because of the unconditional love that she said was “amazing…to see it over and over and over and over again. The strong sense of community and close friendships experienced at New Life was a pivotal factor in many church members’ decisions to stay and commit to this particular church.
Many participants shared about the love they felt from the congregation the very first time they attended New Life. These kind of first-time experiences were not uncommon:

I had visited a few other churches in the past, but as soon as I walked into the door here I got the feeling of familiarity and family. I liken my experience, the first time I stepped in the door, to going to the happiest place from my childhood. (That was my grandparents’.) I felt that, you know.

When I walked in the door I got a big hug from one of my brothers in Christ who also ended up being my best man in my Holy Union. And I walked in and I could palpably feel the love of God here and I looked up and just said “Thank you Lord I am home!” And it felt like this would be home. This is where I would stay. In this church I find a sincere love of God. I feel the Lord moving and the Spirit in the services… There is a sense of love and compassion and caring that goes to the heart when you walk in this congregation.

The sense of belonging at New Life provides members with the space they need to express their lesbi-gay identity and their Christian identity without fear of judgment. One woman spoke directly to this:

I’m here to make sense of my identities and I’m comfortable because I’m accepted. Human nature is all about making sense of your world and I can’t make sense of it and that’s what I struggle to reconcile; I struggle to reconcile what it all means. That’s why I come here, it’s a place that I can be me and I don’t have to worry, you know, if somebody is going to discriminate, somebody is gonna to say ‘oh my God, she’s a lesbian.’

This belonging is both demonstrated and enacted in the shared experience of communion. The unity with the body as symbolized by communion enables these lesbi-gay Christians to feel a sense of membership. For these lesbi-gay Christians, membership in a group with other lesbi-gay Christians creates the prime setting in which they can engage in identity congruence, developing a new and shared understanding of themselves. Legitimacy for the lesbi-gay identity is also provided through this sense of belonging.

**Communion as Affirming Same-Sex Partnership**

The fifth major finding was that the communion ritual acts as an affirmation to same-sex partnership, both legitimizing it and contributing to the sense of unity members felt with their partners. One lesbian couple described the ability to take communion together as the most beneficial aspect of communion at New Life. “Mel” explained:
I don’t know if this is part of other churches, but I really like the fact that we go up to communion together. I do see communion as a celebration and so I like the idea of being able to have that moment with [“Amber”], being side by side with her, as opposed to having to take communion individually. You know, it’s something that we should share and be able to take as a family.

Mel’s partner, Amber, explained further, likening the unity in taking communion with her partner to the unity in a marriage ceremony:

We go together as one, you know. They say ‘two shall become one’ when you get married; we go always, every Sunday and light candles. And they’re usually for us, for very personal reasons.

Mel also felt that lighting the votives together during communion every Sunday had been helpful to their relationship. Mel explained that because the couple had some difficult personal decisions to make in the next few months they had recently lit candles “with the hope and the faith” that God would guide them to make the right decisions.

Many members, whose partners were not able to attend church on any given Sunday, would take two wafers during communion, one for themselves and one symbolically for their partner. Michelle, whose partner was battling cancer and not able to attend church during the time of my field research, always took one wafer for herself and another on behalf of her partner. One of the votives that she lit each week was also for her partner, in prayer that God would heal her and give her strength. Another member explained that even though other members thought the extra wafer she takes was for her dog, in tears she disclosed that the extra wafer she had taken every Sunday for the past two years was actually for her future partner, whom she is waiting for God to bring into her life.

In addition to these aspects of communion, there are many ways same-sex partnership is affirmed throughout the service. The examples and stories Michelle would use in her sermons frequently included same-sex couples and the unique issues they face. One Sunday the entire sermon was devoted to how God desires marriage equality for lesbigay people. The benefit of
this affirmation could be seen in the freedom couples felt to be physically affectionate with one another during the service. One man said:

If I want to put my arm around my partner in the service when I’m blessed and I want to feel the blessing with him next to me, it’s not a problem. I don’t think I’d feel that comfortable with some other church.

During communion many couples received the gifts together, hand-in-hand. For couples seeking prayer, the prayer partners would embrace them together, with one arm around each partner. Many couples hugged or kissed after receiving communion. More so than just the freedom to express their affection for one another physically, the affirmation and legitimation communion provides for same-sex partnership aids in these lesbagain Christians ability to understand and accept what it means to have a same-sex partner as a Christian, which is central to the lesbagain Christian identity.

Communion as an Act of Social Justice

The sixth and final major finding was that members of New Life use communion as a tool for social justice. Participants explained that the enactment of communion is an act of social justice, as members are publicly declaring themselves a legitimate part of the Christian Church, symbolically uniting with those who oppress them at the communion table. Participants also felt that the communion ritual both demonstrated God’s desire for social justice and equality and empowered them to seek justice and equality beyond the communion table. One participant shared his understanding of the open communion table as a demonstration of social justice:

In saying that [the communion table] is open to all, it is indeed speaking towards social justice, that we’re not too poor, we’re not too dark, we’re not too rich, we’re not too this, we’re not too that. This is for everyone, across classes, across races, across religions even, and it’s open to all.

Members see forgiveness as one of the main symbolic meanings of communion. In receiving the gifts, they are symbolically receiving God’s forgiveness of their sins. Participants explained that because of the love and mercy God has shown them through this act, they are
compelled to show love and mercy toward others, seeking justice in their larger community. One participant explained this “domino” effect:

God’s love is like a domino; it should be growing and constantly, improving and reaching out and growing. It’s one thing to sit in the congregation and soak it all up but I have to think that Jesus, and God’s message overall, and in particular in communion, are this love doesn’t just come out from God, but it needs to go out from others and proceed to grow and spread and encompass everyone. The way the communion is presented and approached, I really think it shows that more than any other church I’ve ever gone to.

Another participant added: “Communion allows the individual to change and then that person will go out and change the world.” Another participant described communion as an “outpouring of social justice” that is contingent on “how we apply communion in life.” Participants explained that the communion ritual alone does not accomplish much in terms of justice in the world, but it is the beginning of a process that leads to justice. They also explained that communion is the “outward sign of the end result,” symbolic of the justice that is propels.

Participants described how receiving God’s love and forgiveness allows them to love and forgive others, including their enemies. One Sunday, before the invitation to the communion table, Reverend Michelle said:

We remember the brothers and sisters who disagree with us theologically, but gather at this table. We gather here as a way to forgive, a way to reconcile, a way to bring about justice. We ask God to help all who gather here to remember.

Participants admitted that they often struggled to forgive and love their “enemies.” The tension between wanting to extend love and forgiveness to all and desiring to fight against those who oppress the GLBT community was apparent whenever members discussed the discrimination of the Church or the politics of right-wing fundamentalists. Participants recognized that regardless of how they felt about their enemies in the Church, they were united with them through the communion table. Just as members felt communion unified them as “one body” within their church, they also felt that communion united them as “one body” to the larger Christian Church.
One participant explained that Christ’s intention with the first communion table was to set an order of equality among everyone who is part of the body. He further explained:

As we celebrate that forgiveness, indeed we are gathering with the entire family of Christ that is under the forgiveness.

As an act that connects them to the larger Christian Church, communion is an avenue for lesbigay Christians to publicly declare that they are a legitimate part of the larger “body of Christ.” They are in a sense saying ‘We’re here, we’re queer, and we too belong to God.’

Participants described the purpose of New Life as not only providing a safe religious community for those who have been rejected from mainstream Christianity, but also as working toward equality in the Church so that New Life will one day no longer be necessary. One participant likened the segregation of the Straight and Gay Church to the segregation of the Black and White Church in explaining his hopes that one day there will be just “One Church.” He also said:

It’s kinda sad that…I still feel like there is still very much a need for the Gay Church and it’s kinda sad. But, when you go in to the straight churches…and…there’s this underlying hostility, ya know.

Members of New Life also see communion as providing them with the motivation and strength to pursue the kind of equality in the Church and in society in general that they think God desires. Michelle explained the intentionality in making communion at New Life not just about “receiving grace and forgiveness,” but also about “empowering us to go out and take a stand, to risk ourselves for others, to speak up about justice issues.” One Sunday, after a sermon about helping those in need and standing up for those who are unable to stand up for themselves, during the consecration of the gifts Reverend Michelle said “Do this as often as you need to; as often as you need to identify friends who need your help, do this as often as you need to identify your source of strength.”

Their commitment to carry out the love and forgiveness of God with the strength derived from the communion gifts to assert their equality is evident in members’ active pursuit of justice
in their surrounding communities. Members are involved in a number of gay rights events and protests, many of which are announced and advertised in their Sunday service, including events that they sponsor themselves. Each year members decorate and ride a float in their city’s gay pride parade, one year wearing t-shirts that read “God Adores You,” spelling GAY horizontally. Couples in the church also go to the city’s courthouse every Valentine’s Day to apply for marriage licenses in protest of unjust marriage policies. Participants explained that this kind of activism is a necessary to their faith as the value of their faith is found in the difference it makes in the world. One participant explained:

Our doctrine is about…the difference our faith makes in life--our life, the life of the community around us, the culture in which we live. It’s about making a difference…So it’s not about having all the right answers and I don’t think it has anything to do with heaven or hell…It’s as much about here and now as anything.

Another participant explained how UFMCC was founded on this principle. He then explained how the church continues to promote social justice among its members. He said:

[MCC] attempts to instill in us, not in small part…an awareness and an urge to get out and be politically active and seek equality for all people and, specifically, equality in the political, social, and religious realms for gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual Christians.

Upholding communion as an act of justice is significant for the construction of a lesbigay identity. As a public declaration, communion provides an opportunity for lesbigay Christians to “come out” to the Church not just as a lesbigay person, but specifically as a lesbigay Christian, claiming equality before God. By joining the rest of the Christian Church at the communion table, lesbigay Christians are asserting that their identities are legitimate, divinely legitimate. Communion, as simultaneously expressing forgiveness and justice, also gives members space to reconcile the tension they experience in seeing themselves as fellow Christians who ought to forgive other Christians on one hand and as marginalized victims who have been the recipients of hatred and oppression from the Church on the other hand. The felt empowerment they receive
through the act of communion motivates these lesbigay Christians to continue pursuing justice for themselves and others as they wrestle with this tension.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These lesbigay Christians have clearly utilized the communion ritual to aid in their identity congruence. As sexual minorities who have been rejected from the Straight Church, members of New Life have had to navigate their own form of Christianity in such a way that their faith and sexuality will not conflict. At New Life the communion ritual functions as a tool for creating this identity congruence. Though communion does not fully provide lesbigay Christians with all things necessary for identity reconstruction such as identity scripts and a new discourse, it certainly aids in setting the stage for members to engage in the process of identity congruence, eventually creating one cohesive lesbigay Christian identity. Through the felt love and acceptance from God and the church body via communion, these lesbigay individuals are able to accept their sexuality as divinely legitimate. The tolerance for religious diversity and acceptance of individuality as communicated through communion provides a safe and welcoming context for lesbigay Christians to negotiate their identities. The affirmation of same-sex partnerships through communion and the ability to stand equally with other Christians at the communion table provides further legitimacy for their lesbigay identities.

Participants repeatedly described the communion ritual as both reflecting and influencing their identities. This duality is consistent with Driver’s (1998) conceptualization of ritual as both a reflection and creation of the social order. Hughes-Freeland and Crain (1998) also described the intentionality and agency found in ritual, which is exemplified in Reverend Michelle’s careful wording of the consecration and the intentionality in presenting communion a demonstration of God’s all-inclusive love. Also consistent with the theories of Hughes-Freeland and Crain (1998), communion legitimates and affirms the lesbigay identity.
Anderson and Foley (1998) described ritual as connecting personal “stories” to the larger shared story of the community. Communion at New Life exemplifies this as well. Through communion members are able to attach their personal meanings to the shared meanings associated with communion. This provides members with the opportunity to develop their individual identities within the context of the shared understanding of what it means to a lesbigay Christian. Driver (1998) discussed this connection of the individual to the community as a function of ritual. He explained that among marginalized groups ritual can replace compelled obedience with affection and unity. Participants described communion at New Life as just that. Ridding communion of the typical rules associated with it, members created a pretense-free communion ritual, upholding it instead as an act that unifies them God and to the church body. Communion at New Life creates a strong sense of belonging among members while also providing room for individuality, successfully helping members link their personal stories (their personal identities) to the larger community story (the shared lesbigay Christian identity). This sense of belonging and felt unity among the group is a necessary condition for identity reconstruction according to Ponticelli (1999).

Driver (1998) also explained the function of ritual to provide a sense of “universal love,” connecting ritual participants to even those outside of the community. Participants at New Life described communion as providing a sense of connection to the larger Christian Church, the very people who have rejected and oppressed them. As such, communion allows these lesbigay Christians to assert their equal access to the communion table, publicly declaring their identities as legitimate. Anderson and Foley (1998) and Hughes-Freeland and Crain (1998) also conceptualized ritual as a public declaration and an avenue to present a group identity to outsiders. The ability of ritual to link the past, present, and future, as Anderson and Foley (1998)
described, is evident in the way communion allows lesbigay Christians to simultaneously heal from the pain of discrimination and rejection, work toward identity congruence, and present a congruent identity to the world.

Members of New Life not only utilize communion as an act of justice to claim equality with other Christians before God, they also utilized communion as a motivation and source of strength to pursue justice. Hughes-Freeland and Crain (1998) noted that ritual is a powerful tool for social change. Driver (1998) explained why this aspect of ritual is important, especially for marginalized groups. He suggested that ritual allows the oppressed to envision a just society and also see themselves as partnering with God to bring about the desired justice.

The present study is limited in three ways. Members at New Life utilized many ritual aspects of community as tools for identity congruence. This study only examined members’ use of communion in forging congruent identities. Future studies should consider how other rituals and aspects of participation in the church services also contribute to lesbigay identity reconstruction and identity reconstruction in general. The second limitation, which appears to be a common limitation for studies conducted with lesbigay Christians, is the absence of transgendered Christians in the study. Little is known about the transgendered Christian identity and how it compares to the lesbigay Christian identity. Because there were no transgendered participants in this study, we do not know how transgendered Christians might utilize the communion ritual in a manner unique to their identities and the specific issues they might encounter as transgendered Christians. The third limitation is also a common concern when reporting the kind of rich, qualitative data found in this study. The necessity of presenting the results as six distinct findings forces a somewhat artificial framework on them. Within the context of the New Life community, the six findings in this study are extremely intertwined with
one another in such a way that making distinctions between them results in some loss of their complexity.

However, this study has many strengths. The data are rich. Participants were very self-reflective and open in their explanations of how communion functions as a tool for their identity congruence. Members treated me as a welcomed part of their community, which gave me access to sensitive information and allowed me greater insight into their experienced realities as lesbigay Christians. This study also uses the analysis of narrative and ritual to study identity processes in such a way that uniquely connects theories of religion and ritual with theories of symbolic interactionism. By examining religious practice from a social psychological perspective we gain insight into how individuals’ identities shape the performance and symbolic meanings of a ritual and how participation in a ritual, putting oneself under its meanings, in turn influences individuals’ identities.

This study contributes to the previous literature on lesbigay Christian identity through the examination of the role ritual plays in creating identity congruence. Most previous research on how lesbigay Christians create identity congruence has focused on the adoption of new theologies and methods for interpreting the Bible. The findings in this study suggest that participation in the church service, specifically participation in the ritual components of the service, is also a helpful tool utilized by lesbigay Christians in their identity congruence process. This study also contributes to Identity Theory by framing the study in the context of how individuals negotiate conflicting identities in cases in which both identities are equally and highly salient.

This study also provides helpful direction for future research. To what extent is participation in ritual necessary for lesbigay Christian’s to construct single cohesive identities?
Future research should examine the extent to which lesbigay Christians outside of a supportive community like New Life, not participating in ritual with other lesbigay Christians, are able to construct congruent identities compared to those within communities like New Life, regularly participating in the community’s rituals. Does the salience of either or both identities determine the degree to which participation in ritual is necessary for identity congruence? Future studies should also examine other highly salient and conflicting identities to determine whether or not and to what extent membership in a community with others who share the same conflicting identities and participation in ritual within that community is necessary for identity congruence.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Pastor Interview Guide Questions

1. What are the main values of New Life MCC?

2. How are these values demonstrated in the service on Sunday?

3. How are these values demonstrated in the Holy Communion part of the service?

4. Please explain the meanings and significance of each part of the service.

5. Please explain the meanings and significance of each part of Holy Communion.

6. Can you tell me more about the Theology of New Life MCC?

7. How does the church view the Trinity?
   
   Who is the Creator? Who is Jesus? Who is the Spirit?

8. What does New Life MCC believe about Salvation?
   
   Do you believe that Jesus is the only truth or the only way to truth?
   
   Is it necessary to believe that Jesus is the way in order to be healed, set free, etc.?
   
   Would you encourage someone to become a Christian?

9. What does New Life MCC believe about the Bible?
   
   How do you interpret the Bible?
APPENDIX B

LGBT Christian Identity
Research Information Sheet

My name is Stacey Brumbaugh. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University interested in gay and lesbian Christian identity. I am conducting a study to explore how some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians have integrated their faith and their sexual identity. I will be here for the next few weeks just observing what goes on during church activities and social events. While I am observing, I may take notes. However, be assured that I will not use anyone’s complete name in my notes (I will use first names only or initials). If you are interested in talking about your experiences as a GLBT Christian, I also will be conducting small group interviews.

If you would like to participate in an interview, please let me know. You may benefit from this study by having an opportunity to talk about your experience as a gay or lesbian Christian and you may learn about yourself. Participation is completely voluntary. You were selected as a possible participant because you attend a gay-affirming church.

The risks involved in this study are minimal. All focus group participants are asked to keep any comments made during the focus group and any identifying information confidential. However, I cannot guarantee that they will. What I can guarantee is that I will keep your identity confidential. I will not reveal identifying information to anyone other than my advisor. All notes, audio cassettes and transcripts will either be with me at all times while I am collecting information for the study or will be locked up in a secure location. My advisor and I will be the only ones with access to them. On any printed notes or transcripts you will be identified only by your first name or a pseudonym. Although your real name will never be used, your quotes may be used in future presentations and publications. The audio tapes and my field notes will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relationship with Bowling Green State University, me, or your church. You can refuse to answer any questions I ask and you may completely withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions now please ask. If you have additional inquiries later you can contact me at (419) 378-1945 or by e-mail at sbrumba@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Monica Longmore, at (419) 372-2408 or by e-mail at mseff@bgsu.edu. (Note that e-mail is not always secure.) If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant or the conduct of the study you can contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University: (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.
APPENDIX C

Focus Group Guide Questions

1. What are the three most important things New Life MCC values and strives for?

2. In what ways are the main values you’ve listed demonstrated in the practice of Holy Communion?

3. Holy Communion seems to be something that is both very personal and very public. Would you agree with that?

4. How is Holy Communion personal to you?
   How does Holy Communion benefit you?
   Do you ever not participate in Holy Communion? If so, why?
   Has your participation in Holy Communion helped you grow as an LGBT Christian in any way?
   Do you feel that participating in Holy Communion links you to God? How so? Explain.

5. Can you tell me more about how Holy Communion is public?
   Do you feel that participating in Holy Communion links you to the larger Christian Church? How so? Explain.
   Do you feel that participating in Holy Communion links you to one another? How so? Explain.

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about Holy Communion, what it means, or how it demonstrates the values of New Life MCC?

7. Can you give me one sentence that describes the meaning of Holy Communion here at New Creation?
I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University interested in LGBT Christian identity. The purpose of my study is to explore how some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians have integrated their faith and their sexual identity. Because you attend a gay-affirming church, you are invited to participate in my study. Participation is completely voluntary. The information gained from this study will enhance our understanding about developing affirming LGBT identities. You may benefit from the study by having an opportunity to talk about your experience as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered Christian and you may learn about yourself.

The study consists of me observing what goes on during public church activities and social events. Additionally, I am conducting small group interviews. This is the part of the study that involves you. I will ask you some questions about your experience as an LGBT Christian. You may refuse to answer any question at any time. The interview will last approximately one to two hours. The interview will be tape-recorded and later transcribed.

The risks involved in this study are minimal. All focus group participants are asked to keep any comments made during the focus group and any identifying information confidential. However, I cannot guarantee that they will. What I can guarantee is that I will keep your identity confidential. I will not reveal identifying information to anyone other than my advisor. All notes, audio cassettes and transcripts will either be with me at all times while I am collecting information for the study or will be locked up in a secure location. My advisor and I will be the only ones with access to them. On any printed notes or transcripts, you will be identified only by your first name or a pseudonym. Although your real name will never be used, your quotes may be used in future presentations and publications. The audio tapes and my field notes will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

If you have any questions now please ask. If you have additional inquiries later you can contact me at (419) 378-1945 or by e-mail at sbrumba@bgsu.edu. You also may contact my advisor, Dr. Monica Longmore, at (419) 372-2408 or by e-mail at mseff@bgsu.edu. (Note that e-mail is not always secure.) If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant or the conduct of the study you can contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University: (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and have decided to participate. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relationship with Bowling Green State University, me, or your church. After signing this form you may refuse to answer any questions I ask and you may completely withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. By signing this form you are also indicating that you are at least 18 years of age. After signing, you will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

______________________________  ______________________
signature                      date
APPENDIX E

To Be Read Prior to Focus Group Participants

Participation in this focus group is completely voluntary.

This interview will last approximately one and a half hours. It will be tape-recorded. My advisor and I will be the only ones to hear the tape. During the focus group I will make notes of the order people are speaking just so I can discern who is talking later when I listen to the tape.

Everything that is said during this group interview is to remain confidential. Please do not discuss others’ comments with anyone outside of this group. No identifying information will be revealed to anyone outside of this group other than my advisor.

I will ask you some questions about your experience with and attitudes about the Holy Communion. You will each have an opportunity to respond to the questions. You may also chose to not answer any question at any time. The interview will be a discussion format, so you can also respond to other participants’ comments.

Know that there are no right or wrong answers. I expect that you will have different experiences and opinions on things. Please feel free to agree or disagree with one another. You may also respond to each others comments. Feel free to get more food during focus group.

Please read this consent form and after you have done so please sign and date it.