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Becoming an Intentional Church Community: Relationships, Security, and Discipleship in Sexual Identity and Faith Development

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Abstract

Drawing upon previous research with sexual minority Christian college students, we identify emergent themes important to ministry with sexual minorities integrating religious/spiritual and sexual identities: intrinsic religiosity, social relationships, self-acceptance, and complexity of identity integration. We propose a Trinitarian ministry model wherein the church serves as a holding environment—a discipling community intentionally designed to be relational, secure, and formational thereby creating a synergistic communal climate for identity development related to faith and sexuality.

Keywords

sexual identity, intrinsic religiosity, social support, self-acceptance, ministry, discipleship

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Introduction

Most sexual minorities (SMs) are not unchurched. Marin (2016), in a large national study, found 86% of SMs report being raised in the Church for some part of their childhood, which is striking given that only 75% of the general US population reports the same. Yet, about half of these SMs will leave the Church by the age of 18, a rate twice as high as that of their straight American peers (Marin, 2016), and less than one out of five will attend weekly religious services (Pew Research Center, 2019). Many will leave their faith. About 40% of SMs identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" (Pew Research Center, 2019). They likely leave due to the seeming conflict between faith and same-sex sexuality and the Church's difficulties in helping them to navigate this conflict. In fact, Schuck and Liddle (2001) found two-thirds of their 66 participants experienced conflict between their religion and their sexual orientation. This paper explores what we know about this conflict from broader literature and our previous research and then offers a framework for intentional ministry with Christian SMs.

The conflict between religious/spiritual (R/S) identity and sexual identity stems from negative personal experiences, theological teachings, scriptural passages, institutional misgivings, and congregational prejudice (Marin, 2016; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Religious beliefs and associated practices that condemn same-sex sexuality may create communities in which SMs experience discrimination, rejection, and even persecution (Altman et al., 2012; Foster et al., 2011; Meyer, 2003; Quinn et al., 2016; Ream, 2001; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Yip, 2004). These negative interactions with one's church community often lead to religious doubt (Krause & Ellison, 2009) in which SMs question the Church's teachings, beliefs, and behaviors as well as God's goodness, providence, and love (Astin et al., 2011).

The anxiety from this conflict between R/S and sexual identities is not only based extrinsically in the church's responses to SMs; it also is intrinsically generated by the SMs' responses to the church (Rodriguez, 2009). That is, a climate of rejection, disapproval, and stigmatization may lead SMs to internalize homonegativity in which they come to view themselves quite negatively (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Page et al., 2013; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Yip, 1998). Religious-based sexual stigmatization may lead to lower levels of psychological well-being and higher levels of distress when it is linked with greater religious struggle and increased negative feelings toward the self, such as anger, shame, humiliation, and self-blame, both of which are more likely in SMs with higher levels of religiosity (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009).

While the simple remedy could be transferring to a more gay-affirming church community, many SMs are slow to make such a move because they desire to remain in their church (Quinn et al., 2016; Woodyard et al., 2000; Haldeman, 2004). In order to make this work, SMs may refuse to disclose their sexuality, needing others' acceptance (Crowell, 2016) and fearing the potential loss of a meaningful community (Haldeman, 2004; Quinn et al., 2016; Valera & Taylor, 2011; Woodyard et al.,

2000). When staying within one's faith community becomes too difficult and R/S and sexual identities seemingly remain irreconcilable, SMs tend to minimize the stress and internalized homonegativity through a number of coping strategies, such as identifying as spiritual but not religious, reinterpreting or revising religious teachings, ignoring the conflict, changing religious affiliations, remaining religious but not attending church services and activities, or abandoning religion altogether (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

This exodus from the Church does not mean that spiritual hunger is diminished. Three out of four SMs say they believe in God (Pew Research Center, 2019). That same number are open to returning to church, even though 73% of SMs surveyed by the Pew Research Center (2013) felt Evangelical churches were not friendly to people like them and nearly one-third reported personally feeling unwelcomed by a church. It is no surprise, then, that SMs typically refer to changes in relationships when asked what would encourage their return to the church. In Marin's 2016 study, 12% said feeling loved might bring them back, 9% asked to be given time, and 4% wanted the support of family and friends. Another 5% desired permission to be their authentic selves, and 6% asked for the cessation of attempts to change their sexual orientation. Interestingly, only 8% said their return would require a change in their faith community's theology, even though fundamentalism in Christian beliefs around sexuality have been proposed to be the major cause of identity conflict for SMs (Rodriguez, 2009).

Supportive relationships may be why not everyone leaves the Church. In fact, 36% of SMs continue their faith practices into adulthood (Marin, 2016). Those who attended church regularly in childhood and those involved in youth groups, particularly those who have positive experiences, are most likely to persist. Most of those remaining find themselves in progressive faith communities. However, Marin noted that one-third participate in more traditional faith communities, and 58% hold a more traditional theology regarding sexuality, suggesting they also may have found a way to hold their sexual and R/S identities despite the presumed conflict. While some will reject one of these identities, others will hold both separately through compartmentalization, and some will successfully integrate them, holding both positively with no conflict (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Yarhouse et al., 2018). Rodriguez and Ouellette found those achieving integration were more involved in their church communities and they identified the Church as being instrumental in resolving this identity conflict.

Our Work

In 2005, our research team launched a collaboration effort to hear the voices of SM students in Christian colleges and universities (CCUs) that hold to a more traditional, orthodox view of sexuality. As an accessible group of Christians who were trying to integrate their R/S identity and sexual identities, we wanted to listen as they articulated their intersectional experiences of developing a sexual identity within Christian

academic communities. We believed it was essential to hear them directly, because at the time, other voices were speaking for them, often leading to different characterizations of the experiences of this unique group of students. Some considered them victims of oppressive systems that required repression of broader human diversity which actually needs to be celebrated. Others spoke of them as impaired persons with disabilities that required understanding and awareness, minimally, and possibly some type of accommodation. Still others saw these students as fallen persons who deviated from God's design for sexuality and desperately needed instruction, discipline, accountability, and potentially, healing. (For additional explanation about these different "lenses," see Yarhouse, 2015.)

Our team launched three national studies that resulted in numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Dean et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2020; Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009) and one book (Yarhouse et al., 2018). The first study took place with the support of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The second study was part of a larger investigation by the Association of Christians in Student Development (ACSD) into the sexual attitudes and behaviors of students at CCUs. The third study, also with the support of the ACSD, was a larger and more complex longitudinal investigation. Instead of hearing what life was like at one point in their collegiate experience, we had the privilege of walking with them across time and situation, including hearing from some about their experiences once they left or graduated.

The Longitudinal Study

The final sample of 160 students (19.8% of initial responders) completed the entire online survey in their first year of participation, with fewer of them doing so in the following years as is common with longitudinal studies. The sample looked similar to the typical population across CCUs, except for gender. The gender distribution included 45% female respondents ($n = 72$), 51% male respondents ($n = 81$), and 4% respondents indicating "other" ($n = 7$). Their average reported age was 21.4 years ($SD = 4.58$). Respondents tended to identify as single, never-married (94%). Juniors (22%) and seniors (33%) were over-represented. The sample was primarily Caucasian/White (81%) with 7% being African-American, 4% Hispanic/Latinx, and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, with representation for most sections of the country.

All participants considered themselves to be Christians, were currently enrolled at the CCU, and had experienced same-sex sexual attraction (SSA). We wanted "individuals with SSA or behavior, regardless of self-identification" (Diamond, 2007, p. 142). As such, participants varied in their use of sexual identity labels. Half of the students reported having a public identity as heterosexual ($n = 80$, 50.0%), yet only 5.6% ($n = 9$) identified as such privately. Conversely, 46.9% ($n = 75$) privately held a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity.

Of the final sample, 39 students (24%) agreed to give 45-minute interviews about campus climate, milestone events, current relational status, and R/S. The 39

interviewees consisted of 16 females (41%) and 23 males (59%) with a mean age of 22.8 ($SD = 7.53$). This sample was mostly Caucasian (87%) and single (92%). Interviews were analyzed through Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005).

The primary limitation to this longitudinal study is the self-selective nature of the sample. Only some CCUs agreed to participate, largely representing the Evangelical tradition, and only some of their students decided to participate. Only those SMs willing to share contact information participated, which may suggest they are not representative of those who were not, even though the results were largely similar to those in previous anonymous studies (Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

In addition, the generalizability of this sample is limited as the sample was restricted to college students at CCUs who experienced SSA regardless of sexual identity, and interviews focused on students' sexual identity and faith development within the context of higher education. Even so, findings fit within the broader literature and SMs' experiences within the Church.

Emergent Themes

Several salient themes emerged from our research with potential to inform discipleship, pastoral care, and other communal practices that support the development of those navigating faith and sexuality.

Intrinsic religiosity. Faith matters. We measured intrinsic religiosity (IR), or the degree to which people's religious belief informs how they live, using the Duke University Religiosity Index (DUREL; Koenig et al., 1997). While sexual attraction and sexual identity did not seem to vary by level of IR, students with high IR, that is, those who more greatly integrated faith into everyday life, appeared different than their low IR peers in key ways (Yarhouse et al., 2018). Although most were fairly moderate in their beliefs, those with higher IR saw SSA as less biologically based and less morally permissible than their peers. They also were more likely to agree with campus policies restricting same-sex sexual behavior. In addition, psychological distress, as measured by the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (CCAPS-34; CCMH, 2015), also was related to IR (Yarhouse et al., 2018). The majority of high IR students (81.5%) fell in the low distress range, with minimal to no symptoms, while 40% of the low IR students fared the same. In contrast, 60% of low IR students reported moderate to high distress, significantly larger than the 18.5% of the high IR students with similar symptoms. The high IR students looked as healthy, if not more so, than the general college population.

Determining the reasons for differences by IR is difficult given the correlational nature of this data. While all SMs may experience negative conditions at CCUs, low IR students may be doubly marginalized, not fitting with regard to sexuality or faith (Yarhouse et al., 2018). Although high IR students (69.7%) are just as likely to identify as a SM privately as their low IR peers (82.4%), they (33%) are less likely

to publicly do so, suggesting low IR students (54.9%) are more likely known to be SMs. Likewise, low IR students are less likely to fit with the religious emphases of their institutions and may miss out on what Barnes and Meyer (2012) term the "countervailing influences" (p. 513) of religion. Fitting into and participating in a faith community leads to various health-benefiting effects, such as social support and a broader meaning-making structure, thus potentially mitigating negative effects. Faith also positively influences psychological functioning, increasing one's ability to handle adversity, sense of well-being, self-esteem, optimism, and sense of control, meaning, and life purpose (Koenig, 2012; Pargament et al., 1998).

Complexity of identity integration. Given the seeming conflict between R/S and sexual identities, particularly with institutions espousing a traditional sexual ethic, we expected SMs to abandon either their R/S or their sexual identity due to related frustration and anxieties, yet only 5% rejected one of these (Stratton et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2018). Most found a way to hold both, positioning one identity relative to the other, with some negotiating options for integration.

Some students held both identities separately (Stratton et al., 2017). About 16% of students compartmentalized their sexual and R/S identities. Students claimed one did not affect the other, even though both were clearly present. Another group of students (22%) held both identities together and allowed them to interact in some way, such as sexual identity influencing where one goes to church. They were in the demanding, and often conflictual, process of figuring out how these two identities should be held together, but still lacking a coherent structure for this interaction.

Other students had found some integrated structure for their sexual and R/S identities (Stratton et al., 2017). About 22% had fully integrated these identities into one, unable to speak of one without the other. The largest group (32%) had chosen one identity to be primary and more transcendent, with the smaller identity submitted to it. For some, their sexuality was primary; for others, their faith was.

Students move back and forth through periods of settledness and unsettledness with regard to faith and sexual identities across their collegiate experience (Yarhouse et al., 2018). Perhaps CCUs and churches are complex systems that can both hinder and foster development for students navigating sexual and R/S identities, with students' evaluation of these settings dependent upon their degree of settledness with faith, sexuality, or both. The intersection of sexual and R/S identities within seemingly complicated religious environments may create a positive synergy (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016) which can be formative when engaged strategically, allowing students to create richer, more complex personal narratives, integrating both identities (Chestna, 2016; Meanley et al., 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2018).

Supportive relationships. Learning to navigate conflicts and integrate identities seemed to happen best within relationships. In interviews, SM students reported that their relationships on campus made a difference, and they recommended other SMs should find an encouraging and supportive relationship with at

least one trusted person (Yarhouse et al., 2018). As expected, we found psychological distress in SM students was predicted by three variables: gender identity (i.e., being cisgender or gender diverse), IR, and social support, together accounting for 19.5% of the variance in psychological distress (Dean et al., 2020). It is important to note what was *not* found to predict mental health: church attendance, views of the morality of same-sex sexual behavior, public sexual identity, level of SSA, and their CCUs' views of same-sex sexual behavior.

Unfortunately, most SMs did not find their CCUs to be broadly supportive of them even though perceived support has slightly improved over the years (Dean et al., 2017; Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2018). Students also felt the campus perceptions of SMs themselves were even more negative. To better understand these perceptions, we asked how often during the past academic year students had heard disparaging speech regarding same-sex sexuality from faculty, staff, and students. About 60% of the students had never heard such from a faculty or staff member, and those who did heard less than one per year on average. Peers, on the other hand, were seen as making significantly more offensive remarks.

Regarding social support, these SM students told us they were most satisfied with support from both their heterosexual and SM friends (Dean et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2018). (Support from their SM friends, by itself, was the only form of support not predictive of psychological distress.) Their family and their CCU faculty and staff were also seen as supportive. Churches, however, were perceived as providing only marginal support, less than any of the other groups.

Students perceived less support from all of these groups regarding their SSA, except from their SM friends (Yarhouse et al., 2018). Again, satisfaction with their church's support was the lowest of all and clearly in the dissatisfied range. This dissatisfaction with their churches was particularly troublesome as they worked on sexual identity issues.

Self-acceptance. SM students who have a sense of being accepted and supported on their campuses seem to fare better than peers. Perceived social support and inclusiveness seem to lessen the experience of micro-aggressions, verbal threats, and avoidance behavior, attenuating the effects of subtle heterosexism on college campuses (Hong et al., 2016). Micro-aggressions are "subtle forms of discrimination, often unconscious or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory messages, particularly to and about members of historically marginalized social groups" (Nadal et al., 2016, p. 488). Woodford et al. (2014) found SM students' self-acceptance, measured as self-esteem and LGBTQ+ pride, mitigated the effects of discrimination, reducing ensuing psychological distress (see also Szymanski, 2009).

We found self-acceptance, as measured by the Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), mediated the predictive relationships of both IR and social support with psychological distress (Dean et al., 2020). First, the relationship between IR and psychological distress was mediated by

self-acceptance. While increased faith does seem to be directly related to lower levels of psychological distress, the degree to which one's faith contributes to growth in self-acceptance also leads to better mental health. Moreover, self-acceptance more completely mediated the relationship between social support and psychological distress. In other words, increased social support *only* correlated with decreased psychological distress to the degree it facilitated self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance at the intersection of sexuality and faith for these Christian students was not simply the avoidance of internalized homonegativity, LGBTQ+ pride, or courageously "coming out" (Woodford et al., 2014). Although true for some Christian SMs, other diverse students who hold R/S values as core to their self-image (higher IR) may want to grow toward an even more complex integration that affirms a high value of self, while acknowledging aspects of self that are undeveloped or are not acceptable to their faith (Dean et al., 2020). For our sample of SMs, the results suggested that, without question, relationships and faith matter in negotiating a self-accepting identity, but gay-affirming beliefs were not required for, or even correlated with, self-acceptance in all students (cf. Joseph & Cranney, 2017).

Intentional Communities

As we listened to SM at CCUs, we became increasingly convinced that social context was primary to healthy identity development at the intersection of sexuality and faith. All of the emergent themes (i.e., intrinsic religiosity, social support, self-acceptance) were embedded in narratives related to "holding environments" (Kegan, 1982, p. 116). From our perspective, a holding environment is a communal balance of support and challenge that uniquely "holds" persons where they are in their current identity development, while also encouraging next steps in the process. To create a holding environment that builds these developmental bridges toward a "self-authored" (Kegan, 1994) faith and sexuality, we have concluded that churches need to be intentionally attuned to how faith is influencing sexuality and how sexuality is influencing faith. Neither faith nor sexuality can be omitted or downplayed.

The community creates the conditions for identity formation and meaning-making. We have concluded that a church-based holding environment is a discipling community that is intentionally designed to be relational, secure, and formational. We suggest that those discipleship ingredients are mixed together in a theological culture that is Trinitarian. Those intentional characteristics are described below, and we believe they create a synergistic communal climate for identity development and meaning-making related to faith and sexuality.

Intentional Relationality

Social support and positive relationships stood out as significant for SM students at CCUs in all of our studies (e.g., Dean et al., 2011; Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2018; Yarhouse et al., 2009). These students chose to

enter a Christian academic community, and yet were understandably cautious about how to engage relationally with peers and community. Most were entering Christian liberal arts that emphasized "whole person" education. Yet, when students encountered important institutional pronouncements, largely crafted to speak to sexual issues for those beyond the community (i.e., donors, constituents, and the larger culture), they were naturally tempted to retreat self-protectively. Those impersonal macro-level (institutional) claims were often lacking in nuance or clear definition for those in the community (i.e., students, staff, and faculty), so SMs tended to manage faith and sexuality in more secretive and potentially shameful ways, even when they agreed with the institution's theological and doctrinal positions (Yarhouse et al., 2018).

Self-imposed restrictions among SM students were further reinforced by micro-level (person-to-person) experiences, including interactions among people, such as peers, faculty, staff, and so on. As described above, students noted disrespectful attitudes and derogatory speech toward persons who experience SSA most often among their relational peers. Such conditions made relationships in the community feel risky and insecure. Even when not aimed directly at the SM student, ignorant and unloving language or indirect insults (e.g., the use of "that's so gay" to convey "stupidity") were experienced as micro-aggressions, corrosively impacting self-esteem and perception of social support, setting up students for increased marginalization and potential trauma (Woodford et al., 2014).

SM students seemed clear that macro-level institutional dogma was less of a worry, as long as it did not hinder the micro-level relationships that felt essential to social support and relief of psychological distress. Not unlike what was noted by Marin (2016), the opportunity for relational connections was the priority for SMs in Christian communities. As we asked students what they would say to other students who followed them into faith-based academic communities, it is then perhaps not surprising that they prioritized "relational encouragements" (Yarhouse et al., 2018, p. 276). Their advice emphasized the necessity of forming and maintaining supportive relationships with God, self, and others.

SM students wanted a relational holding environment. We were impressed with their appeal for communities that are intentionally relational—creating the conditions for Christian fellowship and companionship. We believe that church communities, like CCUs, can address this need more effectively by reclaiming "spiritual friendship" (e.g., Aelred of Rievaulx, 2008; Bonhoeffer, 1954; Lewis, 1960) as a vital Christian tradition that requires strategic training across the lifespan. Christian educators are needed who can create "explicit" age-level curricula, while influencing "implicit" formative experiences (see Davis et al., 2018) for friendship development.

More contemporary consideration of the value of a church-based culture of friendship is growing (e.g., Benner, 2002; Hill, 2015; Wadell, 2002). The call to remember the essential nature of friendship in Christian tradition is not only for those who are SMs; it is increasingly viewed as a neglected aspect of development

for all children, adolescents, and adults. Currently, the dominant relational development paradigm for churches appears to be marriage-focused, with persons often viewed as either pre-marriage, married, or post-married (Colon & Field, 2009). Some Christian institutions have begun to reclaim an orthodox relational foundation by affirming singleness as a pillar of communal life alongside the marriage relationship (e.g., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2014). We believe friendship development is essential for an orthodox Christian theology that proclaims the reality of deep non-romantic relational intimacy in opposite-sex or same-sex relationships. Furthermore, the growth of a faith-based friendship culture is the heart of any orthodox narrative of inclusion and acceptance for SMs.

Intentional Security

The importance of safety and security for all students in higher education cannot be over-emphasized. Especially when it comes to an already stressful academic environment, a security deficit tends to make learning and formation lower priorities in the face of safety needs (Cozolino, 2013). When it comes to safety at CCUs, the good news across all our studies was that physical threats or assaults were not presented in the accounts of SMs, and psychological distress was surprisingly lower than we anticipated. Yet, it is also true that psychological distress was still present at moderate, and to a lesser degree, severe levels for some SM students. Distress was usually connected with deficits in relational and emotional security.

Students suggested that relationships were soothing oases when other aspects of their institutional holding environment could be more like emotional deserts. Although we found it amazing how one "secure base" could transform the collegiate experience of a student, SMs were hoping for more than an oasis in a desert. They arrived looking for "safe havens" in which they were not distracted from their development as persons of faith with SSA. They seemed to be looking for secure attachment to a Christian community where they could grow into a more settled person. They did not start their collegiate years with a very sophisticated vision of that person, but their identity quest began with hope that they could find a community in which they could experience increased personal security with God, self, and others and reduced internalized homophobia and shame (cf. Sherry, 2007).

It may sound strange that SM students might be hoping for a secure attachment to a whole community as opposed to an individual caregiver, but Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) suggested this kind of "symbolic bond" (p. 479) to larger groups and organizations is consistent with attachment research with adults. Our interviews suggested church communities could indeed serve as "safe havens" where persons can go when they are in need and "secure bases" for persons to explore and develop. Still, students also related how a rupture in the perceived attachment relationship, especially without recognition or repair, was a powerful interpersonal rejection and even a source of intrapersonal trauma.

Churches and faith-based communities acquired this powerful status as a source for felt-security and felt-rejection because of how they mediate attachment functions related to God (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In particular, churches may be perceived as surrogates for God, helping to regulate attachment-related distress and security (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013). As systemic influencers, pastors are likely to assume tremendous authority as the "primary caregiver" for a church family. Pastors may be seen as spokespersons for God, either inviting or impairing security through macro- and micro-level engagements.

Kirkpatrick (2005) explained how people tend to project their attachment expectations onto God, and by extension, we suggest, to churches as well. Secure assumptions formed in past relationships, as well as insecure expectations with related defenses, naturally arise as churches invite relationships, often with metaphors that strike a family theme. Churches, then, have the capacity to foster a secure attachment to God and others who serve as tangible "parish" attachment figures. When members project insecurities learned in previous attachment experiences, church communities may serve strategically as contexts for corrective emotional and relational experiences. By being intentionally available and responsive to persons who are engaging the developmentally complex process of integrating faith and sexuality, churches may offer a consistent holding environment that grows security amidst insecure states of mind. Our SM students hoped for a reassuring holding environment after previous insecure experiences at home, school, or church were perceived as rejecting or too risky for emotional investment.

Churches need a strategic plan to co-create secure space for all persons, but particularly for those SMs who are coming with defenses learned in previously insecure attachments. What recommendations might come from SM students for churches who are intentional about creating secure conditions for development and formation? Their advice might be similar to that which they gave to their own Christian institutions. They requested more dialogue within the community; more openness to listen, instead of teaching so quickly; more supportive groups doing life together; and more visible examples of authentic leaders in the community who have navigated this intersection of faith and sexuality. These were their ideas for an environment that would hold them securely, while they were learning how to hold themselves.

Interviews also showed another aspect of community that increased micro-level security. The inhibiting power of micro-aggressions on felt-security for students at CCUs was present in the narratives for most of the interviewed students, but evidence of a different kind of securing relational message was also distinguishable (Stratton et al., 2019). Those messages, called "micro-affirmations," referenced "apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur whenever people wish to help others to succeed" (Rowe, 2008, p. 46). Rowe asserted that the relational feel of an organization was largely associated with the presence or lack of little moments. Such moments are not simply the absence of micro-aggressions but

the presence of fortifying and even sheltering relationships with leaders and peers. For persons who are hoping for a Christian holding environment in which they can be formed as disciples, micro-affirmations are the intentional messages that communicate shelter for the vulnerable—the opposite of shame and fear.

Intentional Formation

Few Christians would disagree that faith development requires a relational and secure church community which grows disciples across time. Yet, the stories of SMs suggest the increased complexity of faith plus sexual development requires an even more intentional holding environment. Meaning-making at the intersection of faith and sexuality appeared to be a more complicated process than awareness of either faith or sexuality alone. As Armstrong and Javanovic (2017) explained, "Singling out any single specific aspect of identity for analysis and/or intervention—[e.g., sexual identity or religion]—will be insufficient because both the social meanings and the lived experience of any one characteristic is modulated by others" (p. 218).

In this complex holding environment, students hoped that vital faith and healthy sexuality would be lived around them as they grew and developed. In Christian tradition, we might see their request as a call for discipling. Willard (2006) says, "A disciple is a learner, a student, an apprentice—a practitioner . . . Disciples of Jesus are people who do not just profess certain views as their own but apply their growing understanding of life in the Kingdom of the Heavens to every aspect of their life on earth" (p. xi). Intentional discipleship for SMs provides a formative developmental framework, that is dependent on a relationally secure community. SMs have asked for space to share their stories and for patience "to sort through the gray areas of life" with persons who love them (Marin, 2016, p. 81). Formational discipleship does more than inculcate certain knowledge or focus solely on faith development. Rather, its goal is "whole-person" development, forming a certain kind of person, who is growing more into the image of Christ in all aspects of identity and life. Most are open to people speaking into aspects of identity when they are experiencing safe, stable, supportive, and even stretching relationships. Kegan (1982) explained this holding environment provides a developmental "bridge" from the person one-has-been to the person one-is-becoming (p. 146).

Toward this end, churches may be even more central to intentional identity development than CCUs, if for no other reason than they purport to be holding environments from the cradle to the grave. Whether churches are cognizant of these dynamics, they cannot avoid being human development centers for both faith and sexuality—although one seldom sees the latter explicitly engaged in churches across the lifespan. The topic of sexuality is more likely to show up in youth ministry alone, although Laaser (1999) made the case that sexual development, connected to faith development, needs to be considered in age-appropriate ways from infancy into

adulthood years. The intersection of faith and sexuality, it appears, needs to be modeled and discipled in developmentally attuned ways across the lifespan. Regretfully, an intentional vision for faith development joined with sexual development appears, so often, to be lacking. Without an expanded vision for this intersection, the way the church community holds its developing members tends not to be strategically formative, and students suggested that it often leaves persons to figure it out on their own or look elsewhere for guidance.

What, then, does this intentionally formational discipleship look like? Simply, this is an intentionally secure relationship in which SMs, over time, develop a complex self-narrative that integrates their sexual and faith identities into the "whole person" (Yarhouse et al., 2018). By listening to students longitudinally, we have found the development of this complex self-narrative will involve multiple periods of being settled and unsettled with their identity status, but always, hopefully, embedded in intentionally secure holding environments. This discipleship strategy engages people where they are in their spiritual journey by addressing faith, sexuality, and personhood both explicitly and implicitly.

Shallenberger's (1996) three key movements in the spiritual journeys of SMs provides an overarching framework for this process. Initially, Christian SMs found themselves *questioning* (Shallenberger, 1996), that is, they questioned their sexuality and their religious beliefs related to these attractions and related behaviors. Bringing this searching into dialogue with a trusted other is important in order to process these concerns. Discipleship at this stage included providing a safe space for this questioning and exploration, fostering self-acceptance of these attractions to minimize shame (Dean et al., 2020; Scheer et al., 2020), and increasing positive religious coping (i.e., turning to faith for support and meaning) and decreasing negative religious coping (i.e., questioning faith and God; e.g. Bourn et al., 2018). During the second movement of *reintegration*, SMs navigated the tensions between their sexual and faith identities, searching for a way to hold both within some balance. Discipling here may be reading and discussing relevant literature, including Scripture, sharing with family and friends, learning from other Christian SMs who serve as models, exploring components of faith and sexuality identity (Yarhouse et al., 2018), and practicing different ways of holding both identities. Finally, during *reclaiming*, SMs sought safe communities and relationships within which they could live out their "hold" of these two identities. Considering multiple ways to fulfill intimacy needs through friendship and/or marriage proved especially important for advancing SMs' welfare (cf. Lefevor et al., 2019).

We believe that church communities participate constructively in the life of SMs by preaching, teaching, and living out together the following practical truths: 1) a biblical and theological understanding of personhood and sexuality, including the purpose, beauty, and stewardship of sexuality, 2) an understanding of inherent suffering that is part of any developmental process, 3) the practice of means of grace, particularly around self-development and self-denial, 4) kenosis, emptying

ourselves of our will and being receptive to God's will, and 5) theosis, being transformed into the image of Christ.

Trinitarian Foundation

Throughout this intentional, community-based, discipleship process, the overarching and primary objectives are to help SMs develop integrated self-identities, deepen their relationship with God and others, understand their personal narrative within the larger narrative of God's redemptive story, and grow into the image of Christ. Theologically, we locate these objectives in the Trinitarian story of the Christian faith. A Trinitarian ethos is one based in the balance of communing love—particularity (uniqueness) and process (relationship). The three divine Persons are One without forfeiting particularity; they are Three without loss of communion. Love is personified in this self-giving and self-limiting dance of mutuality and interdependence (Gunton, 2002; Grenz, 2001; Zizioulas, 1985).

We believe that human personhood is informed by this view of divine Communion. It speaks to how humans image God. Humans are made for communion with God and others and formed in the dynamic balance where self can be asserted for the sake of another (self-giving) and self can be denied for the sake of another (self-limiting) (Stratton, 2003). Indeed, classic Christian formation and development always points toward renewal in the image of God for the sake of others (Mulholland, 1993). That is why churches are essential for human development, whether we are talking about R/S identity, sexual identity, or any other type of identity. In the Christian faith, personal development happens in a community that is intentionally relational, secure, and formational. It is a mutual and interdependent holding environment. When it creates the conditions for healthy development, the Church is an intentional community in which human beings discover their identity in Christ and practice how to be in intimate fellowship through the Holy Spirit in a way that images God. The Church becomes a dialoguing context where persons learn how to hold themselves because they are held uniquely by a culture of friendship. Persons learn to be held, so they ultimately can hold others with the holy security they have experienced.

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