



## Journeys of Side B transgender Christians: navigating faith, gender identity, and belonging

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### ABSTRACT

Relatively little research exists on the experiences of transgender and gender-diverse Christians. This study explores the experiences of 13 Side B transgender Christians. Side B refers to a typology developed by Bridges Across the Divide (n.d.) to foster dialogue among sexual minority Christians. While Side A refers to Christians who view same-sex behaviour as morally permissible in certain contexts (e.g., marriage), Side B views such behaviour as morally impermissible. This distinction has been extended to some Christians who identify as transgender. This study sought to understand the meaning of “Side B” for these individuals, including their views on social and medical transition, the use of preferred names and pronouns, and commonly reported behaviours. Participants were recruited through a religious ministry serving transgender Christians. Data were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR).

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The intersection of transgender identity and religious or spiritual beliefs presents a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities for individuals navigating these often conflicting aspects of their lives. Lefevor et al. (2021) note that transgender minorities frequently face conflicts between their religious and gender identities. Despite this, Curley and Leon (2018, p. 52) highlight a “considerable dearth in research on trans/nonbinary identified people and their experiences with different religious, secular, and spiritual (RSS) worldviews,” underscoring the need for more comprehensive studies in this area. In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, which included 27,715 respondents (James et al., 2016, p. 4), findings revealed complex dynamics within faith communities: Two-thirds (66%) of transgender individuals had been part of a faith community, with 39% leaving due to fear of rejection and 19% experiencing actual rejection (James et al., 2016, p. 77). Despite these challenges, 42% of those rejected found a new welcoming community, and among those currently in faith communities, 94% reported acceptance by leaders or members, with 96% experiencing at least one positive accepting behaviour (James et al., 2016, pp. 77–78). However, 18% still experienced rejecting

behaviours, including 6% being asked to meet with faith leaders to stop being transgender and 5% being asked to stop attending services (James et al., 2016, p. 79).

Religious identity and spirituality are deeply intertwined with the experiences of transgender individuals, as evidenced by the broader literature. Prior research reveals a nuanced interplay between rejection, resilience, and reinterpretation within faith contexts. For example, Benson et al. (2018) found that transgender individuals may perceive their gender identities as “created” or divinely ordained, a belief that sustains their faith amid rejection (p. 403). The cognitive dissonance described by Best and Weerakoon (2021) reflects struggles to balance faith and gender identity. Indeed, they observed that “religious affiliation may provide either a safe space to explore one’s identity or an increased risk of discrimination, depending on the context” (p. 4029). The psychological toll of rejection was a recurring theme echoed by Okrey Anderson and McGuire (2021), who apply ambiguous loss theory, proposing that transgender individuals frequently “experience the loss of their psychological family of faith” (p. 393), which parallels the isolation and grief expressed by many participants in our study. This has led some transgender Christians to individualised faith reconstruction, as noted by Levy and Lo (2013). The marginalisation experienced by transgender students at Christian colleges, as documented by Wolff et al. (2017), also parallels the broader challenges faced by transgender Christians. Their participants reported “numerous challenges in Christian college and university environments, including invisibility on campus, interpersonal rejection, disciplinary consequences, and ongoing psychological ambivalence and conflict with their religious beliefs and gender identities” (p. 336).

Although challenges exist in navigating gender and religion, some religious resources have been identified in the literature. For example, Yarhouse and Carr (2012) found that religious coping mechanisms were an important source of support in mitigating distress even amidst conflict. Along these lines, Rodriguez and Follins (2012) highlighted the role of religion as a source of empowerment for transgender individuals, advocating for approaches that emphasise resilience, citing that “faith” can act as a buffer against marginalisation and acute stress (p. 214).

Recent research has shown a shift in perspective when examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other (LGBTQ+) Christian individuals. Rêgo-Moreira et al. (2024) discussed the progression in psychological research from predominantly conflict-centered frameworks to more positive and integrative perspectives. This evolution reflects a growing recognition that LGBTQ+ Christians can experience resilience, empowerment, and positive identity integration rather than being confined to narratives of conflict and dissonance. The authors also emphasised the importance of broader and more complex theories, such as intersectionality and queer theory, in understanding the multifaceted experiences of LGBTQ+ Christian individuals.

Wilkinson and Johnson (2020) underscored the ongoing conflict and psychological distress faced by Lesbian and Gay individuals with religious affiliations. They highlighted that despite societal progress, many continue to experience identity dissonance, fear of rejection, and serious mental health risks, including depression and suicidal ideation. The authors stress the need for educational programmes for religious parents to better understand the impact of their beliefs on the well-being of their LGBTQ+ children. Importantly, they also note significant gaps in research, particularly the lack of studies focusing on the unique experiences of transgender individuals within religious contexts.

The relationship between religious institutions and diverse gender identities is varied and complex. Johnson and Szilagyi (2023) observed that religious institutions exhibit a wide range of beliefs and practices concerning diverse gender identities, with considerable variation often existing even within the same organisation among different congregations and individuals. Despite these differences, religion, spirituality, and participation in religious activities remain deeply influential in the lives of many, including transgender youth and their families, offering valuable opportunities for support and affirmation. Bowling et al. (2021) explored the impact of religion, spirituality, and purpose in life on resilience among transgender and gender diverse individuals. Their study found that while religious affiliation was linked to higher social support, it did not significantly affect other resilience factors. The researchers identified key strategies, including spirituality, purpose, and social support, as essential for fostering resilience in transgender and gender-diverse individuals despite the often stigmatising environments they encounter in religious settings.

Kashubeck-West et al. (2017) provided further insights into the challenges faced by transgender individuals in religious contexts. They note that “For individuals who belong to non-affirming faith traditions, the conflict between deeply held religious values and one’s gender – sexual identity can be very deep” (p. 214). The authors also observe that “Some faith traditions are affirming of sexual minority and TGNC [transgender and gender non-confirming] individuals, while others portray these individuals as immoral, unnatural, and sinful” (p. 215). This variability in religious attitudes towards transgender individuals can significantly impact their experiences and well-being.

The relationship between religiosity/spirituality and mental health in transgender youth is particularly complex. Lekwauwa et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review that revealed mixed findings. Six studies showed that religiosity and spirituality can have a detrimental impact on the mental health of transgender youth, often due to religiously motivated stigma and discrimination. However, seven studies reported positive and negative effects, with outcomes varying based on the context and nature of religious involvement. Notably, three studies showed no significant relationship between religiosity/spirituality and mental health among transgender youth, suggesting that the impact can differ depending on individual circumstances.

Sonneville (2022) highlighted an important gap in healthcare provision for transgender individuals, noting that while gender clinics typically operate within endocrine departments supported by interdisciplinary teams, few incorporate spiritual support as part of their gender care services. This is significant given that many transgender individuals have substantial religious and spiritual needs that can benefit from appropriate spiritual support. Integrating spiritual care with other healthcare interventions can be instrumental in reducing distress and contributing to overall well-being among transgender individuals. Looking to the future, Curley and Leon (2018) suggested that research should delve deeper into the experiences of trans and non-binary students to understand better how these experiences contribute to resilience and foster inclusion. They emphasise the importance of investigating how Transgender Non-binary (TGN) individuals build their social networks, particularly focusing on the role of kinship in shaping their religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

As transgender individuals navigate the complex interplay between their gender identity and religious or spiritual beliefs, they also face the challenge of expressing their

gender identity in various social contexts. This process of gender expression is intricately linked to identity formation and management, and it plays a crucial role in the overall transgender experience.

### **Transgender expression**

Gender expression is a fundamental aspect of the transgender experience, encompassing how individuals present and communicate their gender identity to the world (Anderson, 2020). Klein et al. (2018) defined transgender individuals as “Persons whose experienced or expressed gender differs from their sex assigned at birth,” noting that they “may have gender dysphoria (i.e., distress related to this incongruence) and often face substantial health care disparities and barriers to care” (Klein et al., 2018, p. 645). The authors emphasise that “Gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation, sex development, and external gender expression” (p. 645), highlighting the complexity of these interrelated but separate aspects of identity (Klein et al., 2018).

Doyle (2022) elaborated on the intricate nature of gender identity and expression, explaining that the process of recognising and expressing one’s true gender identity is often complex and evolving. Transgender individuals must navigate social environments that can be either welcoming or antagonistic. The author notes that while many transgender individuals begin to privately explore and become aware of their gender identity around the onset of puberty, it is often not until later in adolescence or young adulthood that they openly identify as transgender and express their identity to others in public.

A key concept in understanding transgender expression is identity management. Doyle (2022) described this as the process of controlling personal information that others in a social context are allowed to know or perceive and determining how visible that information is. This concept challenges binary models that suggest one is either completely “in the closet” or fully “out.” Instead, many transgender individuals, like others in stigmatised groups, make deliberate choices about what aspects of their identity to disclose in different social situations (Lewis et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2022).

The concept of “passing” is another important aspect of transgender expression. Doyle (2022) explained that some transgender individuals aim to be perceived as cisgender, particularly those who view gender in binary terms. For these individuals, the ability to pass is seen as a key goal of gender transition and an expression of their authentic gender identity. However, it is important to note that not all transgender individuals prioritise or desire to pass, and the concept itself is subject to ongoing debate within transgender communities.

While being open about one’s transgender identity can enhance psychological well-being, not all transgender individuals choose to disclose this information in every context, especially when facing potential stigma. Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull (2018) suggested that managing disclosure strategically may be crucial to avoiding prejudice, discrimination, and violence in potentially hostile environments. This strategic approach to gender expression and identity disclosure underscores the ongoing challenges many transgender individuals face in navigating various social contexts.

The exploration of transgender individuals’ experiences in navigating religion/spirituality and expressing their gender identity reveals a complex interplay of personal, social, and institutional factors. These experiences are shaped by the varied attitudes of religious

institutions, the psychological impact of religious beliefs, and the strategic decisions individuals make about expressing their gender identity. Prior research has demonstrated how religious affiliation can serve as both a source of resilience and a space of marginalisation for transgender individuals (Best & Weerakoon, 2021; Rodriguez & Follins, 2012). For instance, ambiguous loss theory highlights the profound sense of grief experienced by many transgender individuals who face rejection from their faith communities (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Simultaneously, these same individuals may find empowerment in spiritual practices or personalised relationships with God (Benson et al., 2018; Yarhouse & Carr, 2012), underscoring the dynamic and often paradoxical role of religion in shaping their gender identity and faith journeys.

The Side A, B, X, and Y taxonomy, developed within the religious ministry Bridges Across the Divide (n.d.), provides a framework for ethical positions on sexuality and gender. Side A affirms same-sex marriage and celebrates LGBTQ + identities, advocating for a progressive integration of faith and sexual orientation. Side B, in contrast, does not affirm same-sex marriage but affirms “gay Christian” as a valid identity. It emphasises celibacy or opposite-sex marriage while valuing deep, non-sexual friendships to meet needs for intimacy.

Side X and Side Y extend the taxonomy to additional perspectives. Side X focuses on orientation change, affirming an “ex-gay” identity and encouraging therapeutic or religious efforts to shift sexual orientation. Side Y, by contrast, rejects identity politics and emphasises regeneration in Christ, viewing Christian identity as superseding sexual orientation and gender identity. Both perspectives differ significantly from Side A and Side B in their theological and practical approaches to LGBTQ + issues (Bridges Across the Divide, n.d.). Although existing literature does not address Side B explicitly, studies on LGBTQ + Christians navigating conservative theological spaces provide an important context for understanding its principles (Levy & Lo, 2013; Yarhouse & Carr, 2012). For example, these studies highlight the tension between affirming one’s identity and adhering to traditional interpretations of biblical teachings, a central concern of Side B theology.

This study focuses on Side B transgender Christians; those who align with Side B perspectives on sexuality and gender identity. It investigates how participants arrived at this view and their definitions of gender identity (e.g., man, woman, transgender, nonbinary) and gender expression, such as cross-gender attire, hairstyle and length, and appearance congruence attained through hormone therapy, among others. The purpose of this study was to uncover how Side B transgender Christians explain their journey to arriving at a Side B view of gender identity and expression amidst their faith challenges and perspectives. Specifically, we explored how participants understood and defined gender identity (e.g., man, woman, transgender, nonbinary) and gender expression (e.g., cross-gender attire, appearance congruence through hormone therapy) and the factors shaping these definitions. The primary research question was: How do Side B transgender Christians arrive at a Side B view of gender identity and expression? Subquestions examined the role of faith in participants’ journeys, particularly how they navigated tensions between their religious beliefs and gender identity concerns or resolved these conflicts. Additionally, the study explored the influence of scriptural interpretation in shaping these perspectives, focusing on how Side B proponents understand biblical texts related to gender, gender roles, and gender identities, as well as the specific passages or principles that inform their theological stance. By addressing these aspects, this

study shows how a sample of Side B transgender Christians articulate and embody their perspectives on gender identity and expression.

## Methods

### *Positionality statement*

A research team with diverse personal, theological, and professional backgrounds conducted this study. The team included Christians from various denominations, reflecting a range of theological perspectives, from moderate to progressive. At least two members of the research team identify as LGBTQ+, bringing lived experience and insight into navigating life as a sexual minority and faith. Other team members contributed as allies or scholars with expertise in psychology, gender, and theology. The research team has collaborated on prior qualitative studies addressing the intersection of faith and identity, which fostered a mutual awareness of each member's background and perspective. The team approached the study with an ethic of respect and a shared commitment to honouring the complexity of participants' experiences.

### *Participants*

Participants were 13 gender-diverse Christians recruited through purposeful sampling and the snowball technique through Posture Shift, Inc., a Christian ministry that has as its mission to "enhance church inclusion, increase family acceptance, protect against victimization, and nourish faith identity in LGBT + lives" (Posture Shift, 2024). Most participants (61.5%) identified as Protestant Christians, nearly one-third (30.8) identified as non-denominational, while 7.7% identified as Catholic. Participants were Caucasian (84.6%), mixed ethnicity, and Hispanic/Latina. Over 84% had been Christians for more than a decade, with 85% attending services weekly, though attendance frequency varies. Responses to gender identity disclosure in church communities ranged from acceptance (31%) to mixed reactions (54%) and non-acceptance (15%). Relationship statuses varied, including married (30.8%), single (46.2%), celibate (15.4%), and committed relationships (7.7%). Gender dysphoria experiences were diagnosed (38.5%), self-identified (46.2%), or in the process of seeking diagnosis (15.4%), reflecting diverse journeys in transgender identity duration.

Five participants were assigned male at birth, and eight were assigned female at birth. The sample represented a spectrum of gender identities: one participant identified as male/other (7.7%), two as transgender women (15.4%), three as transgender men (23.1%), one as transmasculine (7.7%), two as nonbinary (15.4%), one as female (7.7%), one as transgender (7.7%), and two as genderqueer or gender non-conforming (15.4%). Participants also expressed diverse sexual identities, including autogynephilic, bisexual, queer, heterosexual/straight, lesbian, gay-oriented asexual, aromantic, and gay, highlighting the intersectional complexity of gender and sexual orientation within the sample. Participants reflected diverse relationship statuses; among the 13 participants, five were married to opposite-sex partners, two were legally separated, four were single and not dating, two were single and celibate, and one was in a committed but non-sexual relationship. These statuses highlight the varied ways in which participants embodied Side B

teachings, such as maintaining traditional views on marriage and sexual behaviour while navigating their gender identity within a faith-based context.

To preserve anonymity given the small sample size and the potential geographic implications of recruitment through a regionally active organisation, specific geographic information has been withheld. While participants were from varied regions of the United States, this study focuses on shared themes rather than geographically specific trends. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or remotely, offering participants flexibility and ensuring accessibility regardless of location.

Posture Shift Ministry, which reflects a Side B perspective, provided referrals for participants who held a Side B perspective. Adherence was based upon self-report, and all of the people who responded to the invitation indicated a Side B perspective. We stopped interviewing once we reached a number of participants that reflected saturation in consensual qualitative research (Hill & Knox, 2021). We also asked them to define the meaning of Side B and the specific meanings associated with Side B; findings were published in a separate study (Yarhouse et al., 2024). Interviewees participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview either in-person or remotely.

### ***Thematic analysis method***

Thematic analysis was conducted following principles of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill & Knox, 2021). The coding team consisted of three researchers who worked collaboratively to abstract themes from the raw data. These team members achieved consensus on themes both within individual abstracts and across interviews as a unified team. To ensure rigour, all coding sessions were recorded and reviewed by an independent auditor, who provided external feedback, counsel, and validation of the coding process and the thematic hierarchy created for the sample.

CQR emphasises rigour through three key steps: (1) developing and coding domains to organise raw data, (2) constructing core ideas to summarise participants' narratives, and (3) conducting cross-case analysis to identify patterns and themes across interviews. A hallmark of CQR is the use of consensus among the coding team to ensure that multiple perspectives inform the data interpretation. This consensus-based process is complemented by the use of an independent auditor, who reviews coding decisions to enhance validity. Additionally, Hill et al. (1997) highlight the importance of empathy and sensitivity in qualitative research, particularly when engaging with vulnerable or marginalised populations. In this study, we prioritised these principles during data collection by fostering an atmosphere of trust, unconditional positive regard, and psychological safety for participants. These methodological and relational safeguards were critical in allowing participants to share their experiences openly and authentically.

### **Findings**

Participants shared deeply personal accounts of their journeys to reconcile faith and gender identity, highlighting the experiences and reflections that ultimately shaped their adoption of a Side B perspective on gender identity and expression. While these journeys were diverse, common themes emerged that provided insight into how participants arrived at and embraced this perspective.

### ***Balancing personal experience with the Bible***

Participants shared their experiences and specifically shared what led them to a Side B perspective on their gender identity and expression. The most common theme was that of *Balancing Personal Experience with the Bible*, which was observed across all 13 participants (100%). Participants reported seeking to honour both their lived experiences and their interpretative understanding of biblical principles, striving for a harmonious integration. For example, one participant shared, "When God told Samuel that God sees into the heart and not the appearance, and where St. Paul talks about how there's no male or female, or Jew or Greek, or slave or free; those sorts of things resonate with me more now." Another participant shared, "If God can see me as who I am better than I can, and he sees me as female, I'm sure there's a way that that can correspond to who I am."

### ***Struggle to reconcile faith and gender identity***

A second theme that was shared by 12 participants (92%) was that of *Struggle to Reconcile Faith and Gender Identity*. Participants noted an internal conflict between personal gender experiences and religious beliefs, leading to a journey of reconciliation and understanding. For example, one participant shared, "Can I be a trans person? Having this experience of being a person of gender dysphoria, possibly a trans person, a queer person, and still following Jesus?"

Another participant shared,

I feel like God was like calling me to transition. Like God was saying to me that he made me trans and that was part of how he made me and part of his purposes for me and positive plans for me and then me being a bit scared because I'm like, oh, like, but all these other conservative Christians, are going to have issues with it.

Another participant shared several questions they personally wrestled with that came to mind in response to the interview: "I had to wrestle with, how does this work with my faith? Because I was always a Christian, and so coming to terms with gender identity conflicts, didn't make me walk away from my faith. It made me ask the question, 'okay, how do these things fit together?'"

### ***Scriptural reinterpretation and reexamination***

An additional theme identified among 11 participants (85%) was that of *Scriptural Reinterpretation and Reexamination*. Participants engaged in deep study and reinterpretation of biblical texts related to gender, often transitioning from literal interpretations to more contextual understandings. One participant shared, "I started to realize that the ways that we talk about and think about gender today are not really necessarily the same categories of thought that people in these older times were even using in their discussions."

Another participant shared, "Most of the things that Scripture has to say relating to men and women applies a little bit more directly, I think, to biological sex than being prescriptive about gender." Another participant offered, "There's so many descriptions of men and women that are often very cloudy and countercultural in the way that they're described and the way that they're addressed and how they interact."

### ***Psychological distress and coping mechanisms***

Another theme was that of *Psychological Distress and Coping Mechanisms*, and this theme was identified by nine of 13 participants (69%). Participants often described severe psychological distress due to gender dysphoria and used various coping mechanisms, including cross-dressing in secret, seeking psychiatric help, or engaging in hyper-masculine behaviours to compensate for their feelings. One participant shared, "I tried kind of something that I thought was like the last resort for me, it was like this is the only option I felt I had left, and to be frank, when that didn't work, I was kind of left feeling like 'I've got transition or suicide.' Those are my only options."

Another participant shared, "So that did lead me to a ... like gender confirming surgery to help me cope with dysphoria, which has been very much life-changing and so enormously helpful." Another participant offered, "I thought maybe I need top surgery ... I was feeling almost desperate for surgery and I was like, this is not good, I just can't be healthy mentally."

### ***Theology of the body and soul***

Another theme was the *Theology of the Body and Soul* and this was identified by eight of 13 participants (62%). Participants grappled theologically and philosophically with the relationship between their physical bodies and spiritual identities (souls). One participant shared,

"... it's interesting because even God doesn't have a physical body, and yet we still gender God as masculine. So, for me, that's part of how I see the Bible as being transphobic. It's like, even God's a being with no biological sex, and yet we still, he still reveals himself as masculine, and we react to him as a masculine being and entity. So that's a support I see for gender not just being determined by biological sex."

Other participants shared, "I think it's true. And that's one way of describing my experience is, like, I feel like God's given me (biological female), like, a masculine soul" and "God gave me a female body. So, knowing that he sees something special about female bodies, how should I then steward the one that he's given me?" Yet, one more shared, "I do believe that there's aspects of God that's revealed in both male and female form." Lastly, "It doesn't have as much to do with gender expression but more the biological gender of being created male and female and is often a hard passage to face and wrestle with."

### ***Inclusive interpretation of the creation narrative***

Another theme identified by participants was the *Inclusive Interpretation of the Creation Narrative*, identified by seven of 13 participants (54%). Some reinterpreted the "male and female" creation story to allow for more gender diversity within a Christian framework, advocating for a broader, more inclusive understanding. One participant shared, "honestly, I think the Bible has a lot more to say about sexuality than it does about gender. Of course there's passages like "God created the male and female," and it also said God created "humanity," and then specifies male and female, and we know that because God created day and night, that doesn't mean that dusk and dawn don't exist."

Another participant shared:

I've read Genesis one and I'm acknowledging that God has made humanity primarily female and male, and then I'm like, if you go on and read the, like, next few verses, it talks about how then God tells humanity to reproduce. That's the purpose of God making humanity male, female is for reproduction ... But to me, gender it doesn't then, connect the whole part of how God made us, 'therefore, we then have to conform to kind of that, that social gender stereotypes and norm' ... but I think it leaves it a bit more open about how we can function in society. It does get a bit more messy when you're trans, and I'll acknowledge that, but I don't see that as an immoral thing.

Another theme identified by participants was the *Experience of Shame* identified by seven of 13 participants (54%). Participants reflected a sense of inherent flaw and unworthiness tied to internalized and social judgments, profoundly affecting their self-concept and sense of belonging within their religious and broader communities. One participant shared,

In my late 30s I was put on hormones. In 2019 I was diagnosed with gender dysphoria by my doctor and psychiatrist. About a year later I had gender confirmation surgery where I was castrated (bilateral orchiectomy and scrotoectomy). Immediately afterward I felt like it was a mistake feeling like damaged goods and thinking nobody would want me.

Another participant shared,

I started going to a Church a couple of years ago, and I had this big secret that I was trans and I had had surgery, and that I was on hormones. And I was afraid that if anybody knew I would be asked to leave the Church. Lastly, a participant shared, I didn't have to feel like an abomination. I didn't have to feel like, shamed.

### ***Emphasis on God's love and acceptance***

The last theme identified by participants was an *Emphasis of God's love and Acceptance*, identified by seven of 13 participants (54%). Many participants found comfort in the belief that God loves and accepts them regardless of their gender identity struggles. One Participant shared, "wow ... there's space in the kingdom of God for people like me." Another shared, "In the last couple of years since going to church and feeling that God does love me and that I am accepted in the body." Another shared, "Despite the decisions I have made. And understanding, and really believing, that God loves me despite my gender identity and presenting trans, gave me the freedom to de-transition really." One more shared, "I came to realize that even though I am trans God loves me in spite of all of that." Lastly, a participant shared, "We're still a part of the Kingdom of God. We're still accepted. We're still loved, we still belong. And we're a part of that family. We're a part of the church and a necessary part of the church."

Together, these findings illuminate the complex and deeply personal factors that led participants to embrace a Side B perspective on gender identity and expression. Central to their journeys was balancing lived experiences with scriptural principles, an often-painful struggle to reconcile their faith with their gender identities, and a reexamination of biblical texts that affirmed their faith while allowing room for their gender diversity. Although themes such as psychological distress, shame, and coping mechanisms reflect broader challenges experienced by many transgender individuals, participants emphasised that their ultimate adherence to Side B was rooted in their commitment to align their personal and theological understandings within a traditional Christian

framework. This was further expressed in their belief in God's love and acceptance and their unique interpretations of theological concepts, such as the creation narrative and the relationship between the body and soul.

## Discussion

This study sought to uncover how Side B transgender Christians articulate their journey to adopting a Side B perspective on gender identity and expression. The findings reveal that a complex interplay of theological reflection, personal experience, and psychological coping mechanisms shaped participants' journeys. Levy and Lo (2013) highlighted similar processes of individualised faith reconstruction among transgender Christians, noting how individuals reframe religious teachings to affirm their experiences while remaining connected to their faith. The findings reveal how Side B transgender Christians navigate complex tensions between faith and gender identity through theological reflection, personal experiences, and the reinterpretation of scripture, ultimately seeking integration within their spiritual lives. This intricate reconciliation process reflects broader shifts in understanding LGBTQI-Christian experiences, moving from conflict-centered frameworks to integrative approaches that acknowledge the interplay of faith, identity, and belonging (Rêgo-Moreira et al., 2024).

Participants in this exploration commonly balance their lived experiences with the interpretative frameworks provided by their faith traditions. This balance is not merely a reconciliation of identity with religious doctrine but a profound integration that often necessitates reinterpreting biblical texts through a more contextual and inclusive lens. Such transformative reinterpretations often led participants in our study to understand God's recognition and acceptance as extending beyond traditional gender norms, a finding that resonates with Johnson and Szilagyi's (2023) assertion that religion and spirituality can offer opportunities for supporting and affirming transgender individuals despite the varied attitudes of religious institutions.

The narratives reveal a variability in the psychological and spiritual pathways gender minorities navigate. Participants often described significant distress stemming from the tension between their gender identity and faith, a finding echoed by Okrey Anderson and McGuire (2021), who observed that transgender individuals frequently "experience the loss of their psychological family of faith" (p. 393). This sense of loss underscores the need for spaces that balance spiritual belonging with gender affirmation. Despite these challenges, many participants experienced profound realizations of divine love and acceptance, echoing Yarhouse and Carr's (2012) finding that religious coping mechanisms tied to faith traditions remain a source of support amidst conflict. Rodriguez and Follins (2012) emphasise this dual role, noting that "faith can act as a buffer against marginalisation while also amplifying internal conflict in non-affirming spaces" (p. 217). Similarly, Bowling et al. (2021) found that spirituality, purpose, and social support are essential strategies for fostering resilience among transgender individuals, even in stigmatising environments.

The psychological toll of navigating these tensions highlights the dual role of religion as both a source of distress and empowerment. Participants described how reinterpreting scripture and engaging in theological introspection prompted deeper personal engagement with faith. Benson et al. (2018) noted that transgender individuals often perceive their gender identities as divinely ordained, sustaining their faith even amidst rejection.

This belief mirrors the resilience observed in our participants, who expressed similar convictions about their gender identity as part of God's design. Best and Weerakoon (2021) further elaborate on this dynamic, noting that religious affiliation can either provide a safe space for identity exploration or heighten discrimination risks depending on the context (p. 4029). This dual potential of religion as both sanctuary and site of rejection is crucial to understanding the Side B journey.

Moreover, our findings align with Wolff et al. (2017), who documented the challenges transgender individuals face in Christian higher education settings, including invisibility, interpersonal rejection, and disciplinary consequences. These environments often heighten psychological ambivalence, forcing individuals to navigate complex decisions about identity expression. The concept of strategic disclosure described by Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull (2018) offers insight into how transgender Christians manage their identities, balancing authenticity with safety in various religious contexts.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of fostering inclusive support systems within religious communities. Participants' descriptions of finding belonging in affirming spaces highlight the transformative potential of community and kinship networks. Kashubeck-West et al. (2017) emphasise the variability in religious attitudes toward transgender individuals, noting that some faith traditions offer affirmation while others perpetuate stigmatisation. This variability underscores the necessity of creating spaces where LGBTQ+ Christians can integrate their identities without fear of rejection. The narratives reveal a variability in the psychological and spiritual pathways gender minorities navigate, where the struggle with gender identity and faith can lead to significant distress yet also to potent realizations of divine love and acceptance. This aligns with Lekwauwa et al.'s (2023) systematic review, which found both positive and negative effects of religiosity and spirituality on transgender youths' mental health, depending on the context and nature of religious involvement.

This complex journey underscores a dynamic where theological introspection and the quest for authenticity within religious communities prompt a deeper, more personal engagement with faith. It highlights the diverse ways gender minorities find a place for their identities within the broader tapestry of Christian belief and practice, echoing Bowling et al.'s (2021) findings on the importance of spirituality and purpose in fostering resilience among transgender individuals.

### ***Limitations and future directions***

As with all research, this study has limitations that warrant consideration. First, the small sample size of 13 participants, while appropriate for a qualitative study, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of Side B transgender Christians. Participants were recruited through a single religious ministry, which may have influenced the homogeneity of theological and cultural perspectives represented in the sample. This recruitment method may have excluded individuals unaffiliated with similar ministries or those with different interpretations of Side B theology. Expanding recruitment to other settings could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Side B experience. Third, this study relied on self-reported data, which is subject to biases such as social desirability or selective recall. While measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and encourage openness, it is possible that some participants may have

hesitated to fully disclose their experiences, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic. Fourth, the concept of Side B itself is not universally defined or consistently applied, adding complexity to interpreting participants' adherence to this perspective. Side B theology appears to encompass diverse approaches, making it challenging to draw firm conclusions about how individuals embody these principles. Finally, while this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Side B transgender Christians, it does not explore longitudinal changes in identity, faith, or mental health over time.

Future research should focus on expanding the understanding of transgender Christians' journeys within the "Side B" context by incorporating a broader demographic and more diverse theological backgrounds or could investigate how Side B is operationalised across different contexts and communities. This aligns with Kashubeck-West et al.'s (2017) call for more research focusing specifically on TGNC individuals from diverse backgrounds. Studies should also examine the prevalence and impact of spiritual abuse and religious trauma, investigating how these experiences influence transgender individuals' faith and identity integration, addressing the concerns raised by Wilkinson and Johnson (2020) regarding the mental health risks faced by LGBT + individuals in religious contexts.

Longitudinal studies are essential to observe changes over time and to assess the long-term effects of spiritual interventions and community support. Future research could also benefit from larger and more diverse samples to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Additionally, exploring effective supports and restructuring within religious systems to better accommodate and affirm transgender people of faith will be crucial. This research could guide the development of more inclusive and compassionate practices within religious communities, promoting a deeper understanding and acceptance of gender diversity in faith contexts, as suggested by Sonnevile (2022) in the context of healthcare provision.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the deeply personal and multifaceted journeys of Side B transgender Christians as they navigate the complex interplay of faith, gender identity, and community belonging. Participants' experiences underscore how theological reflection, lived experiences, and scriptural reinterpretation converge to foster a dynamic integration of faith and identity. These findings reveal the diverse and often transformative ways Side B transgender Christians reconcile their identities with their spiritual convictions. These findings provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and coping strategies of Side B transgender Christians. It highlights the complex and varied pathways individuals take to integrate their faith with their gender identities, reflecting the multifaceted experiences described by Doyle (2022) in the context of identity management and expression.

This research enriches the dialogue on the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality, highlighting how Side B transgender Christians navigate these dimensions in traditional Christian contexts while fostering a deeper understanding of inclusivity and spiritual belonging. It addresses the "considerable dearth in research" noted by Curley and Leon (2018) regarding trans/nonbinary identified people and their experiences with different religious, secular, and spiritual worldviews. As an explorative effort, it lays the groundwork for further research and fosters a deeper, more inclusive understanding within the Christian community. Furthermore, this study serves as a crucial exploratory effort that maps

out the current landscape and sets a robust foundation for future scholarly inquiry, addressing the gaps in research highlighted by multiple authors (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017; Wilkinson & Johnson, 2020). It calls for a deeper, more nuanced understanding and acceptance within the Christian community, aiming to bridge the gap between doctrinal teachings and the lived realities of transgender believers. This aligns with the need for educational programmes and support systems emphasised by various researchers (Sonneville, 2022; Wilkinson & Johnson, 2020).

As such, we hope this research catalyzes broader discussions and developments that could lead to more inclusive and supportive religious environments. This work underscores the importance of continued exploration and dialogue, encouraging the Christian community to re-evaluate and evolve its approach to encompass all faithful, regardless of gender identity, fostering a truly inclusive and compassionate spiritual community. This conclusion echoes the call for more complex and intersectional approaches to understanding LGBTQI-Christian experiences, as suggested by Rêgo-Moreira et al. (2024) and others in the field.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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