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Practices of Protestant Christianity and its Effects on LGBTQ+ Identifying Individuals in the First Congregational Church of Riverside

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Abstract

The Study

It all started when I took a class in Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). In that class, I discovered that many different groups of people throughout history, have become oppressed and ostracized through religion. This made me wonder whether or not religion could offer an escape to certain individuals in our society now, or if it made them feel more trapped. As a result, I chose to study the LGBTQ+ community due to the way in which the Bible has been interpreted to be unaccepting of this community.

Ultimately, I chose to study the First Congregational Church of Riverside because I had learned that their church was considered open and affirming. Not only that, but I was made aware that a pastor from this church identified with the LGBTQ+ community. Since not all churches believe in LGBTQ+ ordination, I thought it would be interesting to see how this church runs and the feelings that were elicited from the members and pastor of the church.

I wanted to conduct this research because of my belief in equity. I wanted to learn about how I can help better society and how I can help bring up those that suffer the most. No one deserves to be treated unfairly because they are a little different than the rest. I wanted to conduct this research to learn about how to educate the oppressors and bring up the lives of the oppressed. With this research, I hope to at least minimize the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed. I also believe that people that do not identify as LGBTQ+ need to become educated and understand why others are suffering and how they can help prevent these things from happening. Those who do suffer from such negative environments need to learn that they are not alone and that they have people or communities that they can reach out to. The world has to find a way to unite; we cannot keep oppressing others because they are different.

Previous Research

In this study, I wanted to find out the effects of the role of religion in the lives of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. Previous studies have shown that when isolated from their beliefs, it can cause them to struggle with their spirituality and end-of-life issues (Denise, 2013). This study had also showed that when the participants were interviewed, they followed their own individualized beliefs rather than by an institutional church doctrine due to the unaccepting nature of most institutional churches. In another study by Eskridge (2011), they discussed how Christian fundamentalists tend to keep supporting state discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. Due to their exclusion of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, they isolate the liberties and equal treatment as individuals. Most studies show how LGBTQ+ identifying individuals are neglected from their religion (Eskridge, 2011); other studies, like the one conducted by Mcqueeny (2006) showcased the opposite—how two churches committed to going against homophobia redefined the bible and other ideologies to help create a safe space for individuals. In a study by Houghton (2019), they discovered that “participants had integrated their faith and sexuality [by seeking] acceptance from other Catholics, distinguishing between the Church and God, meeting other LGBT Christians, and developing a personal relationship with God.” A study in South Korea compared four congregations of which two were progressive and two were evangelical; they came to the conclusion that the

inclusive-evangelical congregations retained conservative theology on sexuality (sexual relations only within heterosexual marriage) but offered more empathic dialogue with non-heterosexuals than did most evangelical congregations; they also provided more resources, conventional religious culture, and ties to traditional affective networks than the affirming-progressive congregations (Yi, 2018).

These previous studies have showcased that LGBTQ+ individuals struggle when it comes to their faith and that there are some areas that are becoming more progressive and have created those safe spaces for them. While studies have showcased that they have those safe spaces and

consider themselves open to all individuals, it hasn't been discussed whether they are successful or not and how LGBTQ+ individuals feel about those spaces provided and how it helps them with regards to their connection to their religion. This study is similar to Mcqueeny's study in that it sought out to find out how this particular location in Riverside is more inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. This study is important so that we can understand how this church runs and the effect that it creates upon the lives of the attendees of FCC. It's important to compare my results of the study to the study by Yi in South Korea because the First Congregational Church of Riverside identifies itself as an affirming-progressive congregation. In other words, results of this study could contradict the findings of Yi's study. Figuring out if these open and affirming churches positively affect the lives of LGBTQ+ members can help establish what the church is doing right and hopefully, other churches can follow behind those methods to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. If LGBTQ+ members of the church have a safe space in their religious community, they may be able to live a happier life.

Research Questions

In this study, it was important to answer the question, what does this particular congregation offer that makes it more inclusive with the LGBTQ+ community? This question was important to answer because it is necessary to look into the way in which the LGBTQ+ community has integrated their faith with the church and how they are being treated by their religious community. Furthermore, what is it like for the attendees of FCC to have a minister that identifies with the LGBTQ+ community? This question was also really important to look into because even though it is becoming more common to have an openly LGBTQ+ identifying pastor, the feelings of the individuals that attend services may be different. Another really important question to ask is, what is it like to be the pastor in this particular environment? This

question is really important because if we are going to look at the feelings of the individuals that attend services, it is important to look at how the openly LGBTQ+ identifying pastor feels in the environment that it preaches. Do they also feel safe?

Methods

Participants

In this study, participants were members from the First Congregational Church of Riverside (FCC) that volunteered to be interviewed. There was a total of four participants including a minister at FCC. All participants were over the age of 30. While I did not intend to recruit an all-female population, all the participants in this study identified as women. Two of these women have a position on the mission board and a third woman had implied that she was a part of it as well. The minister was the only participant to state that they identified with the LGBTQ+ community. All participants were English-speaking individuals.

Procedures

Participants in this study were recruited through a flyer included in the weekly newsletter of the church. The minister of the church also reached out to many attendees and gave them my contact information. Some of the participants also spread the flyer and my contact information to other members of the church that they knew. There was no monetary compensation for volunteering their time. Those that chose to volunteer were asked to participate in an interview no more than 30 minutes long. Those who agreed to an interview were asked to read and sign a consent form. Those who were unable to scan the forms sent back a written or verbal statement that they had agreed to participate in the interview and their choice on whether or not they agreed to the audio-recording. Besides the minister's interview, I was able to interview three attendees of FCC. All participants were assigned a random letter using a random letter generator, in order

to maintain confidentiality. All four participants agreed to the audio-recordings. The interview then consisted of answering questions about their religious beliefs, identity, satisfaction, and experiences within the congregation. With the consent of individuals, the interviews were audio-recorded to provide a transcript of the language being used in the interview.

Throughout this time, I also watched some of the online services of FCC. While I watched a few of the recent services, I had to look at some of the older ones since the most recent online services did not show the congregants' participation in the church services. I was interested in seeing the reactions of the individuals during the services and their interactions with their peers, so I mostly focused on the in-person live service given right before the quarantine closure.

Analysis

Traditional & Progressive

While transcribing the interviews, I noticed a few common patterns. It's important to point out that most of the patterns that emerged were not in the original hypothesis, but they are important nonetheless because they help establish how the First Congregational Church runs, why it attracts members, and the effects the church creates upon its members. Firstly, all of the attendees who had volunteered to be interviewed were older women above the age of retirement in California. This made me wonder whether this church naturally attracts older individuals or if the study attracted this population. If this is because of the latter, I have reason to believe that since the attendees belonged to the mission board, it is possible that they reached out to participate seeking for answers in how to improve their church. It is also possible that Reverend X reached out to the mission board to reach out to me with regards to this study. Being that they are older and retired, it is also likely that they had more time to offer for an interview due to the

quarantine situation. This is likely because many younger folks are much busier with work or school. If this was because of the former, it brings into discussion something interesting that

Reverend X had mentioned:

We uh we do have a relatively traditional worship service so some people who come to [FCC] expect like a band or um you know really modern stuff and uh we don't have that. Our worship is very--we have an organ, we play hymns, we um you know say prayers together, you know while our choir is singing and laughing. I guess it's -- people expect [that] because we are so progressive theologically, they expect our worship to be progressive as well. And we are progressive thought, but our service --the structure of it-- is quite traditional. Like I still wear a robe and so it might look more like Catholic worship service than evangelical.

Given that the services at FCC are structured to be very traditional, it is possible that the church itself attracts this particular population because of its high church setting and progressive ideas.

It is likely that FCC maintains a certain formality that attracts the elder population to this church.

Despite the population in this study, I could not assume that these few individuals represented the whole population of the church, so I looked at the apparent demographics of the individuals who attended the services. Because a previous service was also being live-streamed, I was able

to see that the majority of the members at FCC seemed to be women over 40. Despite these findings, it does not imply causation. It is possible that older people are drawn to FCC for the music. Participant K had even mentioned that there was “great music acoustics in the church”.

Then again, maybe some people are attracted to a church that reminds them of their childhood. In this case, it would make sense if they wanted to maintain that traditional worship with progressive thinking.

Defining Religion

I also noticed that all attendees had stated that their religion was welcoming to LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, except for Reverend X. Now was this because the pastor was defining

things differently than the congregants? When asked if they believed their religion is inclusive to people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community, Reverend X stated,

So, my particular congregation yes. Christianity as a whole, no. So, my congregation, we have been an open and affirming congregation for nearly 30 years --25 years-- something like that. Which means that we not only accept but celebrate people of all sexual orientations and gender expressions and identities. So, we have LGBTQ people in the full life and ministry of our church. Um, Christianity as a whole has not been very inclusive, and they rely on particular texts of the bible to uh determine that uh the LGBTQ community is sinning, but we do not agree with that interpretation of those texts.

Participant C, on the other hand, mentioned that “God created us all and that makes it imperative to include everybody” to the same question. Participant V stated that “it wouldn’t be [her] religion if it didn’t”. Furthermore, Participant K seemed to make her answer more about her experiences at FCC:

Absolutely. Well by being very welcoming. Um, by including all folks in activities in the church...preaching tolerance and acceptance--and respect -- by supporting activities that are centered around gays -- gays and lesbians.

By comparing all of these answers, we can see that they’ve interpreted the question in different manners. One of the responses is from a pastor by profession, but that does not determine nor establish that her beliefs are more right than the others. While Reverend X distinguished between Christianity and her congregation, we cannot be sure about what the attendees feel with regards to their definition of their religion. Participant V seems to be talking about Christianity in her response; however, Christianity has not always been inclusive. She may be referring to Christianity’s current form as inclusive. Participant C’s response seems very split. While she could be talking about Christianity, she could also be talking about FCC and how they make sure to include everybody. It is also possible that I am misinterpreting it all. Religion cannot be confined to a specific definition since it’s up to each individual to interpret.

I also asked the participants how religious they considered themselves to be on a scale of 1-10, where one is not at all religious and ten is extremely religious and five is somewhere in the middle. Participants C and V did not seem to consider themselves as religious. When asked the question, Participant V responded without saying a number on the scale; instead she said “[I’m] religious about human rights”. Participant C also mentioned that she considered herself to be more spiritual than religious. Both of these participants also make the claim that they maintain a constant routine to attend services so there must be a different reason as to why they attend consistently. Again, their definition of religion is interpreted differently. It is likely that they attend the services because they feel a sense of community with their friends and family. Maybe they feel like church can help teach them more about how to pursue justice and equality in the world. Participant V even went along to add that,

There is a prayer that’s on the outside of the church which says, “what does your God require of you?—to search, to seek justice, to love mercy, and walk hand in hand with your God.” It comes from the Old Testament. That describes things pretty well ---to seek justice not begin justice, not to have justice, but to seek justice, love mercy and to walk hand in hand with your God.

While Participant V quotes a passage from the Bible with this question, she asked “Is there a God?” when I had asked about how close she felt to God. Because of her two opposing statements, it leads me to believe furthermore that her definition of religion is far more complicated than she states.

LGBTQ+ at FCC

When discussing what this particular congregation offers in comparison to other traditional churches, Participant V mentioned to me that at least one transgender person comes to the services and that

[This church] is more inclusive than any other church that I have seen, it’s less judgmental, and I can’t think of another including the Unitarian church that is as open is

this church is. [...] In some churches, people feel unsure of themselves, so they feel uncomfortable. I don't think that's the case for this church.

I think that what Participant V mentions is a very strong statement about how open and supportive FCC is for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. The Unitarian church was one of the very first churches to accept LGBTQ+ individuals, so the fact that she claims that this church is more open is much more powerful. However, it's important to consider that this is only one opinion and her opinion cannot represent the whole congregation in Riverside. It is possible that this participant may have come to this conclusion from previous experience at a Unitarian church. It is possible that this participant may have had many negative experiences at former churches to come to this conclusion. It is possible she may have also been put in super uncomfortable situations with former churches. On another note, Participant K mentions that

[They] specifically, you know develop activities to try to be both sensitive and increase awareness about gay and lesbians. And uh I should say [the] faith we have-- For example, we sponsor a transgender member service at the church. Every year we have a gay, lesbian support group [where] we host a safe space which is uh a group support group for youth for gay, lesbian and questioning. First, we have two separate groups-- we have a support group at the church for gay/lesbian people after services then separately we helped host a um the youth group for gay, lesbian, and questioning um and that group-- they meet -- there is a facilitator who each talks to people, follows up with them, um it's in coordination with the Department of mental health or behavioral health, um it's how it originally started. So, they do activities and we just provide support and they talk to you know counseling. They're included in all activities, [including] preaching; [there's] tolerance and acceptance, and they're given respect.

I think that this church has definitely created many different open spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals to feel safe. Not only does the church provide them with many options of support groups, they also focus on the mental health of the individuals and talk to them. I think that the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals are also given the option to preach at this church makes it more inclusive because they are not limited to anything at all. Participant C also brought up some really interesting points:

Well I think God created us all and that makes it imperative to include everybody.[...] At this point especially after we've been open affirming for so long, I think anyone could walk into the church and consider whether they identified themselves as gay or not and then they would just be welcome. I think our church is very inclusive-- I suppose there are different levels of inclusiveness right now. When we first went through the open affirming process there were a few people who were adamantly opposed to it but very few actually left the church. So, I suppose given you know the whole membership there may be some level of -- and different feelings that I think that was definitely in the minority as far as not being inclusive is very very very few if any at this point. [...] I think we took about a year [to make the church open and affirming] and we had various uh people who had already gone through that process come and talk to us in like seminar forms that kind of thing and there's a lot of discussion within small groups and you know just talking to each other, and if it serves, if my memory serves me right there were only oh sure I can't remember but it was only a handful of people who objected and of those probably only maybe 2 left the church. I'm not sure I want to be quoted on those numbers exactly, but I think that's reason--certainly in the ballpark. And here we make sure that we were really sure of how we felt; everybody else was brought into the fold kind of.

Although there were only a few people who left the church because of their beliefs, it is likely that there could have been more people who were against the open and affirming in the beginning but chose to remain quiet about it in order to fit in with the modern society. It is also likely that some people became educated as they remained in the church. It is possible that some remained in the church because of the proximity to their homes or because their partner or spouse may be the one invested in the church while they only accompany them. Reverend X states:

We have a large LGBTQ+ population in our congregation. We have a LGBTQ social group. We invite LGBTQ people to participate in every part of the congregation including ministry, like being a pastor. We really have no inhibitions whatsoever to LGBTQ inclusion.

Here, all the participants make the argument that the FCC of Riverside offers a more open environment when compared to other traditional churches.

Project Food

All congregants brought up the project food initiative. It is something they all volunteer for every Wednesday night to help feed the homeless. When Participant C talked to me about the food project, she surprised me with the type of responses some homeless people had:

Sometimes [FCC is] even the target of — there's a lack of understanding, even bordering on hatred. You know, over the years, because of our open and affirming stance, I know you know we also do the food project on Wednesday... and we've occasionally had a couple of our homeless -- and this is not really strange, but when they found out we had that as an attitude at the church, they refused to come down and eat and that's not, well, it is rare but that has happened—rarely.

By the way she talked, I could tell that it was very difficult to talk about because she felt hurt about these kinds of instances. I feel like she tried to make the situation appear almost nonchalant, but she was actually frustrated about it. Although she may have been upset by this gesture, it is possible that the homeless would reject food from FCC members because of their personal belief that homosexuality is a sin. While it is surprising that a homeless man would refuse to receive food, it's possible that they are also very involved with their faith and maintain a different set of beliefs about food. In Christian faith, food is very symbolic and important. The food they are receiving may feel like a form of representation of the last supper. By them accepting the food, they may personally feel like they could get sick from eating the food or as if they are committing a sin. It is possible that because of the many false stories that go around about how sexual diseases spread, that they could feel like they will be infected. The simple act of sharing food with others that they deem as “not exactly Christian”, could make them feel like it will taint them. It is also possible that the homeless that refuse to eat are actually not Christian at all. Maybe they pertain to a different religion with a different mindset about the LGBTQ+ community.

Experiences as a LGBTQ+ Pastor at FCC

One thing that really stood out in Reverend X's interview was about her experiences as a pastor in FCC. I asked her about her experiences as a female pastor at FCC and she responded:

Um...I sometimes have experienced pushback when I work with other congregations um and so I have uh experienced some frustration in terms of trying to um treat it equally um... sometimes I'm not invited in prayer groups and that sort of thing of other pastors because I'm a female pastor... but in my own denomination -- the United -- um I would say actually there's a majority of female pastors but I'm not 100% on that.

What is really interesting about what Reverend X says here is how much she fumbles with her words. By using the word "um" a lot, we can tell that she has a lot of trouble saying what is on her mind. Not only that, but she brings up her experiences with sexism within her denomination. This makes me wonder if this happens because the male pastors possibly make up a smaller percentage of the denomination and maybe they all happen to be closer friends. It is also possible that the male pastors exclude females from prayer groups because they have traditional mindsets on who should be giving the services. It is also possible that they would exclude her from prayer because they also meet to discuss how they run their churches and the way they run their services could be different than the way a female chooses to run it. At this point, I have even begun to question if the reason that Reverend X wears a robe is to have her peers take her more seriously in her profession. It is also likely that she does not get invited to prayer because she identifies with the LGBTQ+ community and the men may be against that. However, when I asked her about her experiences as a pastor that identifies with the LGBTQ+ community she responded:

I did um seminary school --which is the school where you're trained to be a minister. I experienced some pushback. Um the denomination that I was a part of at that time did not ordain openly gay ministers and so I had to find a new denomination. That's how I ended up as [a] part of the UCC-United Church of Christ. Um but now, within my own denomination, I really don't experience any — um -- anything negative at all. Um there are certainly people in my denomination who are more conservative um and who don't believe in LGBTQ ordination, but they are still -- because they are part of the UCC, they understand the reality that there are gay pastors and um and they're respectful nonetheless. Um, I -- when I first started at my congregation, I was the first openly gay pastor at my congregation, um, and there were a few people who didn't really understand

and so it took some, you know, education a little bit. That my family is like other people's families um, but there wasn't any um -- I experienced more issues in terms of my age because I was 25 when I started working at church so um there were more concerns about people not um not believing I could do the job because I was too young -- umm then I did push back because of LGBTQ

Just like the previous quotation, Reverend X seemed to have trouble discussing the topic. When she mentioned that she was more discriminated because of her age more, that surprised me.

While she did have to pushback because she was LGBTQ+, she stated that those in her congregation were more concerned about her age. Maybe this was because the people that attend the First Congregational Church are older than her and it is always harder for someone who is older to take a younger person more seriously. It is likely that people would question her ability to do the job right because they could not believe that someone so young could know so much about God and Christianity—especially if the attendees have lived longer than the pastor. It is likely that Reverend X experienced ageism because the more conservative attendees of FCC wanted to judge her without being direct about what they actually wanted to criticize her for. In other words, they projected their disappointment, anger, or frustrations towards her age when in reality, they were mad about having a pastor who identifies as LGBTQ+.

Online Services

When watching the services online, I noticed so many different things. Prior to quarantine, there were no livestreams or videos uploaded to their streaming platforms. There are a few videos from a year ago on Facebook; however, those videos only last a few seconds. They're practically little clips that highlight some of the important events to occur at those given times. On YouTube, there are also little snippets, but the oldest videos go back to eight years, and then one year, and then six months ago. In other words, they have phases of inactivity between those times. I noticed that although the YouTube videos have been active for a longer

period of time than the videos on Facebook, the Facebook videos have managed to maintain a much higher amount of views. When I did the math, I found that the mean average of views on Facebook –from all the videos they had posted—were 372 views. The mean average of views for the YouTube videos were 44 views. What’s even more interesting is that when I did the mean averages of the oldest half of the videos versus the newest half of the videos for each platform, I found that there was an overall decline in the amount of views. From YouTube, the oldest half of the videos had a mean average of 49 views while the most recent half of the videos had a mean average of 39 views. With the Facebook videos, the oldest half of the videos had a mean average of 455 views and the most recent half of the videos had a mean average of 289 views. Clearly, there has been a decline over time about the level of engagement in both platforms. It is possible that because of quarantine, people have become less engaged with the services. It’s possible that without having a stricter schedule with the virtual services, they have minimized engagement. However, these number of views also include videos prior to when quarantine started. So, I’ve also found the mean average of the services from March 15, 2020 until May 24, 2020 and compared the most recent services and the older recent ones within that time frame. The older recent videos on YouTube had a mean average of 37 views, while the mean average of the most recent services was 45 views. The older recent videos on Facebook had a mean average of 334 views, while the mean average of the most recent services was 384 views. On the contrary to my original beliefs, the amount of views of the services on both platforms throughout quarantine has increased. It is possible that say that overall, people have become less engaged throughout the years, but have begun to feel more engaged during quarantine. Someone in the comments section of a video even stated that they were “surprised all the emotions that arose during the [online] service”. It is possible that people are able to connect more in the comfort of their own home. It

is likely that more people are restoring their faith during this time. It is also likely that because people have more free time, they are spending more time on social media where they can get exposed to the services that pop up on their feed. Overall, there are more people watching the services online than the number of people that attend the services in person. Reverend X had mentioned that approximately 100-150 people would attend the services in person. This also makes sense because when I was scrolling through comments on the services, there were many people from all over the world who would choose to participate in the online services. There were people participating in these at-home services from nearby cities, to Northern California, to Nicaragua. It is likely that people from these different areas found out about FCC through shares of the videos. They may have also gotten fonder of FCC and prefer their services from this church compared to churches in their area. Something about this church attracts people from other locations as well.

As mentioned earlier, the first at-home service began on March 15, 2020. The particular service on this date was still in the church while members practiced social distancing. Because of this, this video was the only one I could use to visually see the apparent demographics of the members of the church and the interactions between the members. It was also difficult to see the whole congregation because the camera only showed the first three rows. The FCC website claims that “you are likely to see people of different races, classes, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identifications, couples & singles. ALL are welcome at FCC” (“Welcome to FCC”). While this may be the case on a regular basis, I saw mostly white women over the apparent age of 40 in the services; however, I cannot say that this is an accurate representation of the population that attended the services that day or the population of FCC as a whole. It is possible that the older folk particularly preferred to sit towards to the front. It is also possible that this is

where they chose to sit this particular day. It is also possible that the people sitting towards the front are a part of the mission board and help out throughout the services. It is also possible that certain people, like the altar boys, needed to stay towards the back to make their entry between the benches.

On another note, the rest of the at-home services appear to be slightly less traditional than the last in-person service they had. This would be because the pastor no longer wears a robe when teaching, the choir does not wear their robes, and the choir is also not in a group together—they are singing individually from their homes. I think it was also very unique how they still had the altar boys walk down a room and light a candle. I personally think that these services showcased the variety of people that attend the First Congregational Church a lot more than the in-person service that was livestreamed. These at-home services also had check-ins with their members included in the videos where they got to talk about themselves and their families and how they are handling with everything going on with regards to COVID-19. I think that this allowed for people to feel more connected to others because they get to learn about different families that attend the church on a more personal level. It's possible that some members may have not interacted with other members when at the church, so learning about other people may create a spark of conversation when they meet again in person.

After the in-person services, members are given an option to participate in a Coffee Hour where they can meet other members or interact with them. Based on the comments of the at-home services, people were requesting to figure out a way to continue that tradition. This tells a lot about the sense of community that the individuals feel with each other at FCC.

Conclusions

Outcomes

The First Congregational Church of Riverside runs like a traditional worship service with the exception that they have a progressive mindset. While I came in with the intention to figure out the effects that Protestant Christianity at FCC had on LGBTQ+ folk, I was unable to gather sufficient data to showcase the feelings of LGBTQ+ members of this church. Members of this particular congregation had very positive things to say about the church and their inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. Members of FCC felt that this church provided many resources, support groups, and opportunity for all members. Many of them claimed that FCC was warmer and welcoming. The First Congregational Church of Riverside works on educating the members about current issues that affect their way of living. The participants in this study also claimed that their religion was welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals, except for the minister. Despite their different interpretations, I learned that religion will never provide a specific definition because it will always be interpreted differently by all. Participants from this church seem to be very happy with their pastors, worship services, and open-and-affirming stand. While this is what the participants relayed, one cannot assume that all of the members of this congregation feel the same way because the participant sample did not portray a great representation of the population.

The pastor interviewed for the study feels safe when it came to being a part of the church. She believes that FCC provides no inhibitions to LGBTQ+ inclusion. While she did experience some pushback because she is a young female, she did not let her age, sex, or identity hold her back from what she loves to do. While it initially took some education and time for others to accept her, they've come around and continue to respect her at the church. The few that could not accept her, left the church. While it is likely that people with conservative mindsets remained in the church, Reverend X has stated that she has not had any negative experiences with regards to her LGBTQ+ identity at FCC.

FCC provides its members with a sense of community by providing friendship and comfort. It is a church that maintains its members by not only its welcoming environment, but by its ability to encourage and support its members and maintaining their serious Christian identity. By remaining open-minded and less judgmental, the First Congregational Church of Riverside continues to thrive as an open and affirming church.

Limitations

This study provided many limitations. Because of the lack of LGBTQ+ participants, I was unable to find the effects that religion plays in their life and what they struggle with when it comes to their faith. I was also unable to answer how LGBTQ+ members feel about the “safe spaces” that their religious institution provides them; I was unable to determine if their congregation is successful at making them feel included. While other members made the claim, it is important to see the true feelings of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The fact that all participants were female is a limitation as well. Females could have different experiences than men in the church, so it is important to take that into consideration. If we had included males in the study, they may have had different things to say about their feelings and experiences.

Another limitation is the lack of younger participants in the study. I had interviewed participants of a similar generation and they all responded in similar ways. Since generations change, they act, respond, and feel differently about certain subjects. Having more variety in age could have given a better representation of the population.

COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was limited to the number of participants I could have had in this study. Since I was unable to attend services and interview attendees in-person, I

received a very limited pool of participants. The participants in this study were referred to me by the minister which means that it is likely that they had referred their closer friends in the congregation to me. It is also likely that of the people they had reached out to, those that chose to volunteer would be people who had more free time during this time. Given the circumstances, the participants in this study would not reflect a true representation of the population of the First Congregational Church of Riverside.

Not only did COVID-19 affect the way I would recruit participants, it affected the way in which attendees of FCC would participate in their church. During this time, the services were live streamed through social media; this means that it is possible that not everyone could virtually attend the services if they did not have access to internet or certain social media. As a result, it could create a form of disconnect between the individuals and their religious or spiritual beliefs. Given that it was already a stressful time for individuals all over the world, it is likely that individuals with a lack of basic human needs could also feel a form of disconnect or reinforcement of their religious beliefs, depending on their at-home circumstances.

Since COVID-19 forced the interviews to move onto a virtual platform, it became so much more difficult to understand the participants. Depending on the internet or cellular connection, I was unable to understand every word that participants would state. While I had taken notes and recorded the conversations (with their consent, of course), it was difficult to transcribe because of the lack of clarity.

The Future

Future studies should look into comparing it to other churches in the Riverside area. Not only that, but it would be important to compare traditional evangelical congregations to compare the differences in how they treat their members and how LGBTQ+ individuals feel being a part

of those churches. I would also make sure to obtain more data in-person to compare how the conclusions of my research questions would change to the current results of the study. I would also look more into the population and demographics of the attendees of the church since that may be significant in the development of the congregation. I also think it would be interesting to look into how many other churches out there are like FCC since FCC offers a wide variety of opportunities and experiences. It is important to find out if churches with similar beliefs obtain the same or similar results in the study.

With this study, there is hope that LGBTQ+ individuals from all over the world can find a safe space within their religion that provides love and support and offers a welcoming environment. There is hope that this study will also educate oppressors to make them understand the importance of inclusivity in their religious communities. Maybe one day, other churches will follow after the example of FCC and utilize their tactics to be able to provide a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all its members.

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