

2010

An exploratory study of the life experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual people who were raised in the U.S.A. Mennonite Church : a project based upon an independent investigation

Adele Kathleen Liechty

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Liechty, Adele Kathleen, "An exploratory study of the life experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual people who were raised in the U.S.A. Mennonite Church : a project based upon an independent investigation" (2010). *Theses, Dissertations, and Projects*. Paper 528.

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact elanzi@smith.edu.

Adele Liechty
An Exploratory Study of the
Life Experiences of Gay,
Lesbian and Bisexual People,
Who Were Raised in the
U.S.A. Mennonite Church

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the life experiences of persons who were raised in the U.S.A Mennonite Church and came to identify as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual. The research was a qualitative study with a sample of 10 self-identified GLB people, who were raised in the Mennonite Church. Through face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their life experiences as it pertained to being raised Mennonite and identifying as GLB. They were asked specifically to think about the intersections of their Mennonite identity with their GLB identity development.

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between two pervasive identifying factors. All of the participants told experiences of pain around the U.S.A. Mennonite Church's stance on the non-inclusion of GLB people. Many participants cited the pain of exclusion being tied to the strong identifying factor of being a Mennonite, insofar as being Mennonite includes culture, family, and a way of living in the world. Through the telling of these participant's stories, this researcher hopes to increase the awareness around the complexities of two identifying factors that may be in conflict. This researcher also hopes to incite energy around advocacy for GLB people in both the social work field as well as the Mennonite Church structure.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF GAY, LESBIAN
AND BISEXUAL PEOPLE WHO WERE RAISED IN THE U.S.A MENNONITE
CHURCH

A project based upon the independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Adele Liechty

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, MA 01063

2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not of been completed without the support of many individuals. Thank you to my parents, Mary and Ed, my brother and sister, Gretchen and Karl for your love and support. Thank you to my friends in the Bay area, Emily, Kate, Jess, Jonna, Jillian and Julia, for your loving encouragement. To my supportive friends, who live far away, Sandra, Tara, Annie, Liz, Anne, and Kim, thank you for your many emails and phone calls, during this process. A special thank you to my best friend and roommate Andy, for always making time and space to listen empathically. Thank you to my thesis advisor Shella, for making this project feel doable and kind encouragement. Lastly, I would like to thank the participants of this study for your wisdom, openness and willingness to enter into vulnerable spaces. Your strength is now my strength. Your stories are my stories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
III METHODOLOGY	19
IV FINDINGS	26
V DISCUSSION.....	61
REFERENCES	72
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials	74
Appendix B: Informed Consents and Mental Health Resources	76
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide.....	80
Appendix D: HSR Committee Approval Letter	81

CHAPER I

INTRODUCTION

The Mennonite Church in the United States is an Anabaptist, protestant, and Christian denomination with approximately 110,000 members in 44 states (Mennonite church U.S.A. official website, n.d.). The church advocates a message of healing and hope as the mission statement is: “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the holy spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world” (Mennonite Church U.S.A official website, n.d. para. 1). The Mennonite Church does relief work all over the world for disenfranchised, oppressed people as a testament to their mission statement. However, issues around GLB people and membership in the church remain largely unresolved. In the 1980’s discussion began to arise around the membership status of GLB people in the Church. This discussion has continued throughout the 1990’s, to present day, where certain churches were punished by the larger church organization for their open and affirming status for their GLB members, while other churches left the denomination altogether because it was too liberal. This volatile debate challenges the mission statement of the Mennonite Church to its core.

Much literature has been written about theological discernment around issues pertaining to homosexuality. However, there is little literature and voice in the debate about the effects that this conflict has had on those growing up in the Mennonite Church as they are coming to identify as GLB. There is some literature around gay identity development and even Christian, gay, identity development. The synthesis of this

literature along with the narrative experiences of GLB U.S. Mennonites will hopefully shed light on the effects of the church's non-acceptance on its GLB members.

The National Association for Social Workers, Code of Ethics (1996) states in the preamble, "fundamental to social work is the attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (p. 1). For people growing up as Mennonite, the church is often one their main environmental forces. Social workers should attempt to understand all aspects of a person in their environment in order to best help an identified client. It is especially important for social work clinicians to acknowledge the strong influence a religious identity as pervasive as being Mennonite has on one's sense of identity. Additionally, social workers are dedicated advocates of marginalized groups (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). This statement has great potential for marginalization and oppression for GLB Mennonites as this particular group has been marginalized in society and especially in the church. For example, the Mennonite Church in the United States has an official statement barring GLB identifying people membership to the church unless they are celibate.

This qualitative thesis seeks to answer the question: "What are the life experiences of people who are raised in the Mennonite church and identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual?" In particular this thesis examined this question through the frame of identity development. This thesis explored many important questions beyond the main research question. It explored the possible conflict and integration between these two identities, and the impact on one's identity and sense of self. It also explored the messages that are given from the church about sex and sexuality. This study had a sample of ten participants who were interviewed in a semi-structured, open-ended format.

The researcher used an interview guide to maintain consistency, but most questions were intentionally open ended. The participant was allowed to share their personal narrative and include additional information that seemed pertinent to the topic.

Chapter two discussed literature applicable to the research topic. It looked at research relating to issues of sexuality in the Mennonite Church, identity development in general, Mennonite identity, shame and identity, and processes in the Mennonite Church around issues of sexuality and GLB people. The third chapter specified methods used by the researcher to execute this study. Chapter four detailed major findings of the study and sought to answer the research questions. Finally, chapter five looked at the findings within the framework of the literature discussed the limitations of the study and the relevance for the field of social work.

CHAPER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this thesis is to ask the question: are there common life experiences amongst GLB people, who were raised in the U.S.A Mennonite Church? In order to answer this question, it is important to examine the literature surrounding this topic. There is relatively no empirical research surrounding the life experiences of GLB Mennonites. However, the literature review will take a look at identifying factors of the Mennonite religion and culture, theories around identity development, messages from the church surrounding sexuality, the aspect of shame in the identity development of GLB people, and next steps for the Mennonite Church.

Mennonite Identity

For the purposes of this study it is important to understand what it means to be a Mennonite. The Mennonite religion places emphasis on community. Insofar as growing up in a Mennonite community can be like growing up in a sub-culture, with it's own value system, food, and other cultural aspects. There is a strong historical component to the Mennonite Church that bases itself in the separation of church and state which as stated on the Church's official website is "equally important today in an era of terrorism and governmental response that tends to suppress the rights of individuals and nonconformist communities" (MC USA, n.d., para. 3).

The Mennonite church came out of the protestant reformation in the 1500s from this core belief that the church should be separate from the state and that people should voluntarily choose baptism as adults. The "Anabaptists" from which the Mennonite religion derived, were subsequently martyred for the two generations due to their beliefs

(MC USA). This group took on a stance of non-violence and non-resistance during this time, which is a core belief that has carried through to the modern Mennonite church in the U.S.A. The Church's official website lists other core beliefs such as, openness to all, helping others, and peace and love (MC USA). Some advocates for GLB people may find these values to be hypocritical as the larger church is not open to people who are GLB. This message of openness and love may also be confusing to a person who is GLB and growing up in the Mennonite Church as it seems to be applied to many people but not if one is GLB. This could result in a deep sense of rejection from a community that preaches peace, love and openness.

Liechty (2008) looks at Mennonite identity as a result of the culture in her article and writes that a major tenet of the Mennonite community is that, "The individual is to serve the community, placing the good of the sisterhood and brotherhood ahead of the self" (p. 29). Liechty conducted eight qualitative interviews about the identity development of Mennonite women. Liechty's (2008) study found that the women experienced the community in three ways, "as a source of values, as a family context, and as a social environment" (p. 44). This has major implications for this study. The strong cultural and communal aspects of the Mennonite religion may make the statement of non-acceptance even more difficult for GLB Mennonites because they not only feel stratified from a religion but from a culture that represents their known values, acts as a family, and is one's source of a social environment.

Identity Development

There are many models of identity development beginning with Erikson's basic model developed in the 1950's and 1960's, which states mature identity as, "striving towards sameness and continuity, and as thus constrained by structural elements such as closure, consistency and commitment" (Schachter, 2002, p. 1). Kaufman (1974) writes, "Identity is a sense of self, of who one is and who one is not, and where one belongs. It is a sense of inner centeredness" (p. 568). Schachter (2002) goes on to enrich the discussion of identity by noting that it requires the inclusion of parts of one's identity that is significant. It appears that the Mennonite Church's statement of non-acceptance can create a conflict in a GLB person growing up in the Mennonite Church. It is the seeming inability to reconcile a GLB identity with a Mennonite identity that maybe the impetus for certain issues around identity development for a Mennonite, GLB person.

Yarhouse (2001) argues that, "For many persons, religion is a cultural and social expression that is secondary to sexual identity" (p. 336). This may be true insofar as one usually develops a religious or cultural identity before they develop a sexual identity. However, it is arguably circumstantial what identity is of more value to an individual. This may be especially poignant when two identities are in conflict with each other as this may be the case for someone who is Mennonite and comes to realize they are GLB identifying.

It is important to look at this through Erikson's (1980) "life span stages." The stages are as follows:

Infancy: Trust vs. Mistrust
Toddlerhood: Autonomy vs. Shame
Preschool: Initiative vs. Guilt
Childhood: Inferiority vs. Industry

Adolescents: Role confusion vs. Identity formation
Young Adulthood: Intimacy vs. Isolation
Middle Adulthood: Generativity vs. Stagnation
Old Age: Integrity vs. Despair

There are many internal and environmental variables that could influence a person in each of these phases. For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on the possible effects the Mennonite Church in the U.S.A. has on a member who is GLB as they go through these life phases.

It is unclear where in life the variable of being GLB and Mennonite comes into play. It is possible that it may in early childhood as some children have a sense of their sexuality at this point in time. If a child does have some awareness of their sexuality the messages that the child is receiving from the church about GLB orientations may be of grave importance to the life phase, “inferiority vs. industry.” This may be especially pertinent if the child’s gender expression is less than celebrated by the environment around them including the church. If that gender expression is linked to their sexuality and larger identity as a person there is the potential for the child to exit this stage of life with feelings of inferiority.

It can be assumed that in adolescents, most individuals have some sense of sexuality, even if it is in denial. U.S. society expects that adolescents are sexual beings as messages are heard about “adolescent hormones.” The messages that the church is giving adolescents about GLB sexualities may be greatly influential in Erikson’s (1980) adolescent phase, “identity vs. role confusion.” Dunkel and Sefcek (2009) regard this phase as the most important, writing, “Here the adolescent is faced with the task of developing a sense of self-continuity. Identity formation results in the psychosocial strength of fidelity” (p.14). If a young Mennonite person feels attraction to people of the

same gender but is told by the church that being a Christian Mennonite and being GLB cannot exist together, then they may struggle with developing self-continuity.

Prior stages in life most likely affect the latter stages in Erikson's model. The young adult phase deals with intimacy and isolation mostly in regards to romantic relationships. If a person has experiences feelings of inferiority and a lack of self-continuity earlier in life they may have more difficulty in the young adult phase around romantic intimacy. These feelings if left unhealed and disintegrated into a larger life narrative could be problematic throughout the life of a GLB Mennonite. Erikson (1980) writes, "The basic virtues-can arise only in the interplay of a life stage with the individuals and the social forces of a true community" (p. 2). This study will pay special attention to the complex interplay between the social/environmental variable of being Mennonite and GLB and experiences of identity development.

Sexuality in the Mennonite Church

Prior to 2001, the Mennonite Church in the United States was divided into two conferences; The General Conference and the Mennonite Church Conference. In 1986 the General Conference Mennonite Church came together in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and adopted a "Resolution on Human Sexuality." Human sexuality addresses a wide array of issues, but the most controversial topics the document speaks to are the issues around homosexuality and the church. The document contains three parts: "Our Affirmation, Our Confession, and Our Covenant." In these three sections issues around homosexuality are addressed in the following ways:

Sexual drives are a real part of our lives, but that the satisfaction of those drives is not the chief good in life. We confess our fear and repent of our rejection of those of us with a different sexual orientation and our lack of compassion for their struggle to find a place in society and in the church. We understand the Bible to

teach that sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and a woman united in marriage and that violation of this teaching is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching precludes premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity (Mennonite Church Historical Committee, 1987, p. 21).

The final paragraph is a call for ongoing dialogue and discernment as well as an affirmation of congregational study, stating, “We covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other. We will promote congregational study of the complex issues of sexuality” (MCHC, 1987).

In 1987 the Mennonite Church Conference adopted an ideologically identical document titled ‘*A Call to Affirmation, Confession and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality*’ (Mennonite Church Historical Committee, 1987). Between 1986 and 2001 the issue became heated at times as some congregations were disciplined for letting “practicing homosexuals” become members. The year 2001 marked the merger of General Conference Mennonite Church with Mennonite Church into Mennonite Church USA. The merger invoked a new set of membership guidelines and a new policy that allowed congregations to decipher their own membership qualifications, but that they do so in consultation with their specific conferences. The membership guidelines dedicate an entire section to “Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership” (Membership Guidelines, MC USA website). It reaffirms the 1986 and 1987 Saskatoon and Purdue statements as the official teaching position of Mennonite Church USA.

The U.S. Mennonite Church’s position on homosexuality is much like the statements of other Christian denominations in the United States. In light of the Matthew Sheppard murder in 1993, many churches and church leaders reviewed language around

their stance of homosexuality. The Mennonite Church's stance echoes what the Anglican bishop said in 1998 when he stated, "While rejecting homosexual practices as incompatible with scripture, the resolution also condemns irrational fears of homosexuals and affirms that gay men and lesbians are loved by God" (Lambeth Conference, 1998, p. 10). Many Christian churches are advocating a sort of, "love the sinner hate the sin" mentality. Though people are not necessarily being rejected as whole people from the church there is still the great possibility that this ambivalent stance causes confusion and possible effects on identity development for those growing up in these religious traditions.

Shame

Shame is one aspect that needs to be considered as a possible experience of the of any GLB person. It should be especially considered for those who grew up in a religious tradition that does not openly accept homosexuality, like the Mennonite Church. Kaufman (1974) writes about other aspects of shame such as an intense fear of exposure. He writes, "This fear of exposure prevents escape from loneliness of the shame experience, because one cannot express the inner pain and need" (p. 569). This reflects a possible experience of a GLB person growing up in the U.S. Mennonite Church. The pastor may never preach a message about homosexuality, but the simple omission of the GLB experience along with an overarching Church statement about homosexuality could be enough to create an experience of shame for a GLB individual. Silence about the topic of homosexuality could even produce a shaming experience for GLB individual in the U.S. Mennonite Church.

Yarhouse (2001) writes, “Perhaps on measures of mental health, such as measures of happiness or self-acceptance, it matters most not whether a person pursues a particular path of identity synthesis but whether their identity synthesis is congruent with their broader valuative framework” (p. 331). This richens the conversation started by Kaufman about shame and identity in 1974 because Yarhouse is specifically speaking about sexual identity development in a valuative framework. Many people in a faith community, such as a Mennonite Community, receive their valuative framework from their faith and religious institutions. If the community is non-affirming of GLB experiences, it can be hypothesized that this makes for a challenging experience for a Mennonite GLB individual to synthesize these two identities perhaps causing cognitive dissonance.

Wells and Downing (2003) take an in depth look at shame in the identity development of lesbians. The article looks at six stages of an integrated lesbian development. The six stages originally developed by Cass (1979) are identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. Wells and Downing (2003) developed a quantitative survey that looked at 317 self-identified lesbians. The participants were given a survey where they identified how open they are about their orientation and then correlated these responses with their level of identity development. The study then used an internalized shame scale as another correlative measure. One important finding in this study is that “the higher the woman’s lesbian identity stage, the lower her score would be on internalized shame” (p. 102). It would be interesting to look at how the non-acceptance of the Mennonite Church effects the identity stages for GLB people and how it therefore effects internalized shame.

Liddle and Schuck (2002) report their findings from a qualitative and quantitative study of 66 lesbian, gay and bisexual people about their perceived conflicts between religion and sexual orientation. The study found that two-thirds experienced conflicts in denominational teachings, scripture, and prejudice from other members. The effects of the conflicts include, but are not limited to shame, depression and suicidal ideation (Liddle & Schuck, 2001).

Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (2002) add to this conversation by stating, “The experience of oneself as self-continuous over time and situations results from an integration of desire, a presently coherent life story” (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002, 256). The analysis of Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (2002) juxtaposed with the finding from the Liddle and Schuck (2001) article calls into question if religious conflict in GLB Mennonites makes integration of self more difficult. Furthermore, is this lack of integration a precursor or cause of internalized shame? Liddle and Schuck (2001) did find religious conflict to be highly correlated with shame in GLB individuals.

Next Steps for the Mennonite Church

The dialogue about membership and the Church’s official stance on homosexuality continues to evolve. Many individual congregations have decided to go against the official church statement and adopt open and affirming stances for their GLB members. These churches have faced punishment by the larger denomination and there has been ongoing dialogue between those who feel the Mennonite Church USA should be an open and affirming denomination and those who are content with the Church’s current statement.

The 1999 summer edition of, *Conciliation Quarterly*, Mennonite publication notes ten rules to guide a dialogue on issues around homosexuality, adapted by Marc Kolden. The rules are as follows:

- Attempt to identify areas of agreement.
- Avoid the use of slogans and name-calling.
- Represent opposing positions accurately and fairly.
- Distinguish the actor from the act.
- Try to identify the core or central issues at stake.
- Admit weaknesses in one's own position.
- Distinguish moral substance from particular formulations of moral rules and principles.
- Distinguish morality from public policy.
- Distinguish morality from pastoral care.
- Include the perspectives of all concerned. (p. 2).

Many of the rules address the notion of attempting to find common ground, avoiding polarization and self-righteousness. Schrock-Shenk, a leader in the Mennonite Church (2006) echoes the rules when she says, "We need to work much harder as Mennonites to find common ground. We polarize too quickly" (interview by author, February 26, 2006). However, the research presented, shows the possible negative and damaging effects of a non-accepting religious environment. The knowledge of this research may give those on the side of the Church being open and affirming more of a sense of urgency to create change. This is especially poignant when one looks at the positive outcomes for those in environments where both their religious and sexual identity is affirmed.

In 2005, Lease, Horne, and Nofzinger-Frazier (2005) looked at affirming faith experiences of GLB people. It brings to light the possible effects of non-affirming faith experiences. The study had 583 participants of 343 men and 240 women (Lease et al., 2005). Experiences were examined through a series of 18 questions pertaining to affirmation, support and acceptance in one's religious group (2005). The study also explored behavioral manifestations of the religious group such as the celebrating of Gay

and Lesbian commitment ceremonies, the celebrating of coming out, and GLB participation in the organization (Lease et al., 2005). The study found that being part of an affirming faith community is, “clearly beneficial” for GLB people (Lease et al., 2005). The study reports, “The negative relationship between affirmation by faith group and internalized homonegativity suggests that overt and accepting behaviors and attitudes from one’s faith group provide a contrast to the generally negative prevailing societal messages about homosexuality” (Lease et al., 2005, p. 387). In other words, an affirming faith community has the power to heal hurtful messages about homosexuality that are pervasive in U.S. society. If faith communities have the power to create a more positive identity for LGB people, with affirming messages, then it can also be assumed that they have the power to do great damage when messages are non-affirming.

The research done by Lease et al. (2005) also causes one to question; must a faith community be affirming to do no harm? The Mennonite Church, like many Christian Churches, have not put out overtly hateful messages about GLB people, but it is possible that anything less than being affirming is damaging to the identity development and mental health of LGB Mennonites. Kaufman (1974) writes about shame as a, “dynamic which operates ever so subtly in even the healthiest of human interactions” (Kaufman, 1974, p. 568). Just as a white person must be actively anti-racist in a best effort to do no harm to people of color, a straight person or an institution must be actively combating subtle messages of heterosexism in order to do the least amount of harm to an LGB person. This is because shaming messages about being LGB are so pervasive in U.S. society.

On Easter Sunday of 2009 a large group of affirming pastors delivered to the larger church, "*An Open Letter to the Mennonite Church.*" The letter reads:

We are writing as pastors and people who have ministered in the Mennonite Church. We are distressed by our Church's exclusion of sisters and brothers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). Our hope for a Church guided by the radical hospitality of Jesus compels us to invite us all to confession and healing.

Our vocation as ministers is to proclaim and embody the Good News of Jesus Christ, which is the Gospel of radical hospitality and extravagant love (Luke 15, John 4). We are all sinners in need of God's grace. We believe that we cannot deny that grace to anyone seeking to be part of the Body of Christ. We are each called to faithfulness to Christ, accountability in the Church, and integrity in human relationships. We believe that all people are invited to faithful fellowship in this Body, blessing for our deepest relationships of love and care, a spiritual home for ourselves and our children, and the opportunity to fully express the gifts for ministry that God has given us.

Through our unwillingness to extend full hospitality to LGBT people, we believe the Church has lost sight of this Gospel vision and, in so doing, has seriously compromised its witness. Jesus often confronted religious people with their spiritual blindness and offered healing so that they could see not only with their eyes but with their hearts (Matthew 23, John 9). Jesus offers the same challenge and healing to us today.

We believe that now is the time for us to confess and be healed of this spiritual blindness. Some of us, out of love for the Church, have remained silent for the sake of unity. However, we must acknowledge that the Church is already divided. We have been willing to sacrifice our LGBT brothers and sisters, their families and friends to preserve a presumed unity. While some of us may caution to "go slow," we are reminded by prophets such as Martin Luther King, Jr. that going slow only perpetuates the injustice. We are also reminded by Jesus and our Anabaptist forebears that the faithful path is not easy or without pain.

As ministers in Mennonite Church USA, we invite all members of Christ's body in MC USA to join us in this call to confession and healing. If you desire a Church that offers Christ's radical hospitality and extravagant love to everyone, please sign on to this letter by going to the web site, www.openlettertomcusa.org.

Let us seek a new unity where all are welcome and all are called to an abiding "*faith, hope and love...and the greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13). For the healing of Christ's Body and the sake of the Church (Open letter, 2009).

The writers of this letter seem to acknowledge the potential psychological and spiritual

damage that is being done to the GLB people raised in the Mennonite Church.

Prior to the summer of 2009 a movement began called Pink Menno. The group came together to support the pastors who wrote the Open Letter. This group was a visible presence at the 2009 Mennonite USA conference in Columbus, Ohio where they encouraged supporters of GLB Mennonites to dress in pink for the entire conference (Pinkmenno official website, 2009). There was a backlash for the larger denomination including a letter from Jim Schrag, the executive director of Mennonite Church USA, that criticized the presence of the Pink Menno group and reported that 90% of the church delegates voted on passing a resolution to keep the original church statement that excludes GLB people as members of the Mennonite Church USA (Schrag letter response, 2009).

Though the Church's official statement has not changed it is quite possible that the presence of dissenting voices is creating a much different experience for GLB Mennonites. It is now a topic that is at least being talked about and there is even a strong group of voices promoting acceptance and affirmation. It is now possible for a GLB Mennonite person to find a progressive church where both their sexual identity and Mennonite identity are affirmed. At the same time, the majority voice in the Mennonite Church is non-accepting. This split in the church creates the possibility for a wide array of experiences as a GLB Mennonite. It also creates the possibility that one may have a negative experience in a more conservative church and a very positive experience at a different congregation, within the same lifetime. Noticing the different effects of a positive experience versus a negative experience is a necessary function of this study.

A part of honest discernment must include the stories of those in gay and lesbian

covenanted relationships. Bender (2001) writes, “If we continue to meet and talk about, instead of with, same gendered oriented people of faith, we cannot find God’s understanding of same gendered intimacy” (p.16). There is an admitted view that believes dialoguing with GLB Mennonites will somehow cloud discernment. However, if one is going to look honestly, at all sides of the issue, the perspective of those in question must be heard. This study seeks to richen the conversation not only for people involved in the Mennonite Church but also those involved in the mental health field to really take an honest look at the experiences of GLB Mennonites. Both of these identities are most likely very pervasive in the lives of these people. In the social work field, it is likely that there is at least some understanding and empathy around what it is like to have a GLB identity. However, it is unclear if having a very pervasive religious-cultural identity that is non-accepting, of the GLB identity, is as well studied and understood.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature on the identifying factors of the Mennonite religion and culture, identity development, shame in the experiences of GLB people, and the next steps for the Mennonite Church. There is a clear need for research on this population. No research is available for this specific population. Questions still remain on the interplay between the strong identifying factors of being Mennonite and GLB. How does one identity impact the other? Answering these questions may help clinicians in the field of social work to have a greater understanding of pieces of identity that are in conflict. Persons creating policy in the Mennonite Church and larger society may gain a greater understanding on the effects of discrimination and exclusion.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research methods, this study explored the question: “What are the life experiences of people who are raised in the Mennonite church and identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual?” The purpose of this study was to understand and explain any life experiences relating to the juxtaposition of being GLB and Mennonite. This researcher encouraged the participants to consider both their Mennonite and GLB identity and question how each identity has affected the other.

This researcher interviewed ten participants using a semi-structured interview with an interview guide (Appendix A) that inquired about their GLB identity and their Mennonite identity. The interview questions also delved into coming out experiences, reactions to coming out from family and the church, and the process of integration between these two identities. The interview guide had six closed questions pertaining to demographics including, age, race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and whether or not a person grew up in a rural, urban or suburban setting. The remaining questions were all intentionally open-ended so that one’s narrative could be addressed without the biases of the interviewer. The question that addressed the crux of the research question was, “How has being part of the Mennonite Church affected your feelings about yourself as a GLB person?” Questions about emotional experiences and, “Did you ever seek therapy during your process?” specifically emphasize the relevance of this study to the field of social work.

The GLB Mennonite population that has not been frequently studied, though there have been more and more studies on GLB people from different religious traditions. The

interview often jumped back and forth between questions pertaining to experiences as a Mennonite and experiences as a GLB person in the hopes to discover the integration, or lack thereof, between these two identities. This study is meant to provide greater understanding of those who have two strong identities that can cause confliction in their societal context and how one is able or not able to reconcile two seemingly opposing parts.

Obtaining a Sample

Non-probability sampling techniques, specifically convenience and snowball sampling were used to obtain participants for this study. Additionally, the researcher is a member of the population being studied and was able to use church contacts. Participants were recruited for this study through the researchers personal connection to the San Francisco Mennonite church, and personal contacts of friends and family. This church is open and affirming for GLB Mennonites. The researcher first contacted the pastor of the church and requested permission to put out recruitment information in the church's weekly bulletin. After permission was granted an announcement was placed in the bulletin (Appendix B). Participants then contacted the researcher through email and arranged a time and place to meet for the interview. The researcher screened the participants through emails that detailed the exclusion criteria. The sampling techniques contributed to the lack of diversity in the sample. For example, seven of the ten participants were male because the church in San Francisco has more male members. Ideally the sample would have included a wider racial, age, and gender range. However, the constraints of the researcher's geographic location as well as the racial makeup of the U.S. Mennonite church made this difficult. It is important to note that due to the small

sample size of the study, the findings and the following analysis cannot be generalized to all people who are GLB and grew up in the Mennonite Church.

Of the final sample, seven contacted the researcher after reading or hearing the announcement at church. One participant's name was given by another participant and then directly contacted by the researcher. The two remaining participants were personal and professional contacts that were contacted directly by email. The screening questions were conducted through email to ensure that the participant met the criteria for the study before scheduling an in-person interview.

Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

The criteria for the sample specifically focused on those who were raised in the Mennonite Church. Many liberal Mennonite churches have been able to gain members who are GLB but did not have the experience of growing up in the Mennonite tradition. This lends itself to the question, "Why only study those who were raised in the Mennonite Church?" This researcher was particularly concerned with identity development, which is often created over a long period of time. Though different people may acquire different Mennonite values and traditions if they come to the church later in life, they do not have the experience of a Mennonite identity since birth. This researcher was interested in looking at people who came out after or during a time when the Mennonite identity was already apart of them, in order to see the relationship or possible struggle between the two identities.

The sampling criteria and research question also specifically focused on those people who identify as GLB. The researcher excluded those who identify as Queer or transgender because the Mennonite Church USA specifically has a document that

discusses homosexual activity. However, as of now, there is no official church statement on gender identity. This researcher was specifically interested in the experiences of GLB people in a church system where there is a specific, written document that is exclusionary to their sexual orientation.

Sample Description

The final sample consisted of ten participants. The participants spanned in age from 23-58. Seven men and three women were interviewed. Nine people identified as white and one person identified as racially mixed. Nine people identified as gay or lesbian and one person identified as bisexual. Of the participants, six people identified as middle or upper-middle class and four people identified as lower-middle class or working class. Eight participants grew up in a rural Mennonite Church and two grew up in an urban Mennonite Church. Eight participants are still active in the Mennonite Church and two participants were no longer participating in the Mennonite Church. All participants were college graduates.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Smith College School for Social Work, Human Subjects Review Board (Appendix C), this researcher conducted ten face-to-face interviews in the San Francisco Bay area ranging from 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in private offices. All of the interviews began with the signing of consent forms (Appendix D) and distribution of support groups and mental health services (Appendix E). The consent form outlined the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and described the potential risks and benefits of participation. Participants were able to read the consent form and ask questions about their participation. The letter also

informed participants that they could choose not to answer any question, stop the interview at any time, and withdraw their data from the study anytime before April 20th, 2010. Both participant and researcher signed and dated the consent form and participants were given a copy of the form for their records.

Each interview consisted of two segments; the first being a demographic questionnaire and the second being open-ended questions about experiences, both past and present, of being GLB and Mennonite. Although the same material was covered, the researcher did ask clarifying and follow up questions during each interview. In some cases, the participant would answer a subsequent interview question before the researcher asked the question. In these cases the question was not repeated. The interview guide helped the researcher to maintain consistency throughout the interview process.

This researcher audio-recorded and manually transcribed the interviews and removed all identifying information. A professional transcriber was also hired after signing an informed consent (Appendix F). Confidentiality was provided and the consent forms were kept separate from the data. All participants' identifying information was concealed and participants could not be identified by their direct quotes. All materials were locked and secured according to federal regulations and will remain secured until their destruction in three years. The referral list (Appendix E) given to the participants included, the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender interest and the Pink Menno Campaign. A list of therapy referrals was also available for the participants.

There were some risks associated with participating in this research study. The questions could have brought up uncomfortable feelings for some people participating in

the interview. The interview questions asked the participants to discuss personal information, including participation in the church, family of origin, and identity. The participants were informed that if answering any of these questions elicited uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, that they were not required to answer any questions, and the interview could be terminated at any time. Participants were reminded of this information before the interview.

There were also benefits to participating in this study. Participants may have felt that they benefited by being part of the study by sharing and giving voice to their experience of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual and growing up in the U.S. Mennonite Church. Participation in this study may be able to increase other's understanding of their experience, as well. This study will also contribute to the field of social work. It may aid in helping professionals in the social work field gain understanding and knowledge of this population, as well as an understanding that religion is an important aspect of client's lives and identity development.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher and professional transcriber. After the transcriptions were completed the data was analyzed using content/theme analysis techniques. The transcriptions were read through multiple times. In the first reading, major themes in each narrative and initial connections in people's stories were recorded. The transcriptions were read again, seeking themes and applying codes to each narrative. The process continued of coding and re-coding in the subsequent readings. The codes were then charted making note of each time a code arose in a narrative while also analyzing the themes and evidence of theory that arose in each

interview. Finally, direct quotes that illustrated each theme and theoretical application were chosen.

Emerging themes in the coding of the interviews were: common answers among the defining factors of being a Mennonite, the pervasiveness of a Mennonite identity, shaming messages from the larger Church structure, similarities and differences in coming out experiences, and paths of healing and integration. These themes and other prevailing findings will be discussed in later chapters. The following study is of a small sample size, from a specific geographical location. While these stories are pertinent to the discourse and conversation around the specified research question, the following findings cannot be generalized to all GLB Mennonites.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences of being raised in the Mennonite Church and coming into a GLB identity. The sample size was small for this study but there were some thematic threads connecting people's stories. There were also many differences in people's stories that will be explored by looking at various themes. The themes that will be explored in this chapter are Mennonite identity, messages about sexuality from the Mennonite Church, coming out experiences, conflict between being Mennonite and GLB, integration and healing.

Mennonite Identity

All ten participants were asked to describe their Mennonite identity. Some clarifying questions were: What does it mean to be a Mennonite? When did you realize you were Mennonite? What are the major tenets of being Mennonite? The four major themes that came from this questions were: historical references (n=7), religious beliefs such as pacifism and adult baptism (n=9), the idea of community and service to others (n=7), and other cultural references including simple living, food, music and dress (n=8).

Participant #1 speaks of a historical connection to the church when he says:

I grew up in a family that had Mennonite roots for several hundred years, back into the 16th or 17th Century.

Participant # 6 mentions her strong historical tie to the church as well when she says:

And we had a long history of being in the Mennonite Church. My great-great-grandfather that helped start it was the one that had emigrated over and was from France/Germany area where there was a mass of people who moved over together.

Like participant # 6 participant # 8 has a strong sense of his historical roots being in the Mennonite Church when he expresses:

The Mennonite Church I grew up with – Probably three or four hundred members. It's very old. It migrated as an intact congregation from Prussia to Russia to the United States. So that was part of the 1874 massive migration out of the Ukraine into the United States. And so the congregation bought this whole tract of land from the railroads. And so they just rebuilt the Russian colonies basically. So they had their Church and everyone go the same land that they had had back in the Ukraine.

The historical roots also seemed to be linked to one's ethnicity to a certain degree, as people are aware of their ethnic roots being tied to the Mennonite church. The historical references made by seven of the participants show that a Mennonite identity is often very deep, insofar as it is linked directly to heritage. It is bigger than an individual's identity.

As mentioned, nine participants reference various religious beliefs being strong identifying factors for them as Mennonites. Participant # 2 states:

It was religiously based I guess. So: pacifism, peace and justice, adult baptism are the core things, I would say.

Other participants go on to describe the connection between belief and behavior for many Mennonites. Participant # 9 says:

I would lodge my identity as a Mennonite as taking seriously the example of Jesus especially the call to pacifism and non-violence.

Participant # 5 echoes this idea with a personal story from his family:

You know, certainly the peace witness. You know, that you never fight back- if somebody would try and engage you in a fight you wouldn't fight. And, you know, military who we didn't- well, our family didn't serve in the military. And actually, since it was sort of right at the end of conscription- of draft, and my brother was affected by that. That was something that our family went through. How he was registering as a conscientious objector.

Participant # 10 also speaks of a connection to non-violent beliefs influencing behavior and action when she says:

And hearing the stories of my grandfather who was a conscientious objector in WWII and how that was very much a part of his identity, the non-violence. He was one of the first draft dodgers in Canada.

The idea of beliefs influencing behavior is an important aspect of identity to acknowledge. When one is able to take action or hear stories about family members taking action, identity seems to become more solidified. The participants of this study seem to show that being Mennonite is not only where you go to church on Sunday, but how one behaves and how one lives life.

Another aspect that speaks to a Mennonite identity being a way of life is the focus on community and service to others. Seven of the ten participants explicitly mentioned community and serving others as being core, identifying factors of Mennonites.

Participant # 3 talks about his family's commitment to service when he says:

Maybe just service oriented, too. My parents used to be aid workers in Africa, and so their cast was passed on to me, in my childhood for sure. Just, you know, helping other people and when we'd go on family vacations, we'd go and build houses and doing MDS (Mennonite Disaster Service) work. We'd go to Haiti a lot and drill wells. Stuff like that. That definitely was a big piece of me.

Participant #10 though no longer a practicing member of the Mennonite church, speaks to this idea of community and service to others, which has stayed with her to the present.

She says:

I had a dear friend passed away recently and it was very important to be there. I was there with her because that is what I grew up with. You clean their house and you wash their clothes. I got a group of lesbians together and we cleaned her house and that is almost a Mennonite story. And my lesbian friends asked how I knew to do all that, Is it because you are a clergy and I said no, it was because I was raised a Mennonite.

Participant # 1 confirms what Participant # 10 reports when he says:

I think a sense of community support whenever something interesting or unfortunate happens. So if somebody moved from one house to another or needed to add something or had relatives coming to town that didn't have room, there

was always a sense of extending hospitality or assistance for the people that were in the congregation

Again the participants reiterate that being Mennonite is very much a collective identity.

The idea of the strong community is important to note as some felt pain, later in life, when they were no longer accepted by their tight knit communities.

Eight participants make other references to a Mennonite identity being a sort of cultural identity, insofar as it may influence the way one dresses, what one eats, music, and how one orients to the world. Participant # 5 remembers:

So, well, as I became aware of it I would say if you were Mennonite you lived simply. You know, so you'd notice that people who were different from you at least- you know, they drove fancier cars, they had bigger houses, they wore nicer clothes. Or, you know, sort of the latest fashions

This participant did not live in a closed Mennonite community and was able to see the cultural differences between himself and his peers from other religious traditions.

Participant # 6 and Participant # 10 both mention strong images about the culture.

Participant # 6 recalls:

I enjoyed doing the (Mennonite) relief sale. My father was really into the butchery and helped do the pig roast and the sausage for the pancake breakfast for that. We always made the strawberry pies.

Participant # 10 remembers the strong cultural and communal images when she says:

The stories come back to me. I remember sitting and watching all the Mennonite women make quilts and them reading and I remember being there in the summer time and those are strong images.

Both of these participants spoke using images that indicating the cultural aspect of this identity.

The main idea that seems to come from the prompt, "Describe your Mennonite identity," is that it is a pervasive identity. It can effect one's historical roots, beliefs

showed through action, and every aspect of a community and one's culture. Participant one states this idea perfectly when he says:

Mennonite was kind of like: When did I first notice that there was air that I was breathing?

Participant # 3 says:

It was everything. It was like schooling, the home life, and Church life. So it was all kind of- all within the community. It was like the world I was in. All my relatives- we all lived next to each other and I saw them all the time. All my friends were Mennonite, for the most part. And our lives pretty much revolved around the Church.

The pervasive nature of the Mennonite identity is a crucial element in the narratives of these participants. It comes into play as they report coming out experiences and coming to terms with being both Mennonite and GLB.

Messages from the Church about Sexuality

All of the participants were asked to talk about the messages they received from the church about sexuality and homosexuality. The participants were asked to think of specific messages from their childhood rather than looking at the messages they are receiving in the present day. This is because the researcher was especially concerned with the messages that people received prior to coming out and how those messages affected the coming out process. Of the ten participants eight could not remember it being explicitly discussed (n=8), two remember explicit messages about the topic (n=2), and two talked about messages received from the larger church (n=2). Of the eight who did not remember receiving explicit messages, four said they do remember knowing that being GLB was bad (n=4).

As mentioned above, eight participants reported that they did not receive explicit messages from their churches, growing up, about sexuality or homosexuality. Participant # 1 reports that sex in general was not discussed. He says:

Well you won't be so surprised to find that in the 1950s and 60s it wasn't discussed at all. I remember not one single Sunday School lesson or sermon throughout my grade school and high school careers, education, where sex was even mentioned. The word didn't come up. It wasn't discussed. We weren't even told what we shouldn't do. It just wasn't a topic. It wasn't raised at all. So everything that I discovered or worked out about sexuality came from exposure in the high school setting and my non-Church friends. I can't remember even talking about it with the kids from Church. That was somehow off limits- it wasn't a topic. So that was something more for the outside world, for high school. We went to a public high school, with all those kids.

If the church did not discuss sex at all during that time, it is no surprise that homosexuality was also not a topic of discussion. Participant # 1 goes on to say:

Homosexuality also wasn't in grade school and high school. Not even to be something that you made fun of. It just wasn't even a possibility. I don't remember anyone talking about it. There were surely gay kids in high school, but we didn't identify people that way or even consciously think about it. At least not in the circles I ran in. There were probably other attitudes in some other groups in high school. And in Church it was really just never discussed. I don't remember it being raised a single time. No scripture lessons, no discussions about it, any more than any other extreme thing. It was just not a topic.

The research found that people who came of age in the church before the 80's (n=6) received very few messages about sexuality in general. Participant # 9, who was in high school in the early 80's says:

By the time I was in high school there were occasional references in high school and in youth group. There was a little bit of sex is a nice thing and when you are married you can have some.

No participants reported that sexuality was a topic that was discussed at any great length in the churches where they grew up.

In 1986 and 1987 the larger church became doctrinal on the issue of homosexuality. This study shows that this is the point where participants started to receive more explicit messages about homosexuality. Two participants explicitly mention the 1986/1987 documents. Participant # 9 recalls:

I graduated from high school in 1985 and the Purdue statement came out in 1986 but there were a series of conversations before that, so when I was a junior in HS the whole church was broken up into smaller groups to discuss doing adult education hour, but I don't remember much of that conversation and it by no way portrayed a positive representation of homosexuality. It was all really frustrating.

Participant # 6 remembers:

I didn't know actually what was going on. You know, hindsight I'm like- looking back going: Well, I was there, but I didn't know the politics of what was going on at all. How it was happening.

Participant # 9 appears to have been much more effected but the 1986/1987 statement than participant # 6 due to the fact that he heard negative messages about homosexuality from people in his home church.

Of the four participants, who had not yet come out as GLB, in the mid-80's. Two participants reported explicit messages about homosexuality, and one reported a message received through observation. Participant # 4 recalls:

I had a really really close relationship to my youth Pastor at the end of high school when he was going through a discipling process with me. And at one point we were having lunch and he either said that he was counseling someone or, I don't know, but he said that he had been helping one or more guys who were struggling with attractions to other guys. And he asked me if I had ever had that problem. It was something to fix. It was a problem. It was fixable. It was something to deal with. It wasn't something to help people just to come to terms with it. That's probably the most explicitly – in like a pastoral context – I ever heard it dealt with. Was that- if I had been open I could've gotten counseling to get fixed. Like reparative therapy.

Though that was a less than accepting message from the Mennonite Church, this participant also remembers receiving a more positive message from his professors at his Mennonite College. He expresses:

One of my bible professors – my main bible professor – actually challenged me more to re-examine this issue. And so I did. And I came to a point where I was like- it's (homosexuality) ok for other people.

Interestingly, this participant received both positive and negative messages from the church prior to coming out. Participant # 9 received a very negative message from the principle at his Mennonite High School. He tells:

One day when the English teacher was absent the president of the school, who is now a prominent figure in the Mennonite Church, substitute taught the class and for some reason decided to come talk to us about Greek language and used the text from Paul where he was pointing out what Paul means when he is talking about homosexuality is that it is not just the passive partner but the active partner that are damned to hell.

Participant # 3 remembers another church in his area being disciplined for their acceptance of GLB people. He details:

In high school there was the whole Germantown thing. I don't know if you know much about the whole Germantown Church thing- happened while I was in high school. I think it was like '98 maybe, or '97. The whole thing went down. That kind of just like totally shut the closet door for me. For the Church to kick out a whole congregation of people that were- well the way I understood it was there was a gay member in the Church that was a practicing member, Mennonite. And the Mennonite Church of the United States, like the General Conference, asked the congregation to expel him. But the congregation kind of stood by him and said- No, we're not gonna expel him. We're gonna love him and not judge him for that. And they ended up kicking the entire Church out of the Mennonite organization or conference or whatever. And that happened while I was in high school, so that kind of just set the bar of where I felt the Mennonite beliefs were on that. That was kind of my only way of really feeling out where they stood on that. Cuz there's a lot of things that aren't talked about and I think homosexuality is one of them, for me at least. Like it wasn't preached- oh, it's a sin and whatnot. But it was understood that it is. Which is weird.

This participant received a message from the larger church just by hearing about a situation in another church. The message that he received was that an entire congregation could be disowned by the larger around the issue of GLB identities.

Like participant # 3, four of the eight participants, who did not receive explicit messages, report that they still had a sense that being GLB was a bad thing. Participant # 5 discusses:

Obviously somewhere, you know, along the way I knew that it was wrong. That it was a bad thing. And I don't remember that there was ever something from the pulpit. But you know there might have been. I don't remember things in Sunday school. I don't remember it coming up in conversations with other kids. But it might have. I just- I blocked it out or I just don't remember. But the message was obviously there. I mean somewhere I got it. Without ever really having explicit conversation with anybody. It was clear that homosexuality was wrong. It was evil. There must have been something somewhere that said that at least a number of times for me to pick up on that. So, but that was- it was clear in our Church that that was not ok.

Participant # 5 goes on to discuss other variables besides the church when he says:

I don't remember that there were gay or lesbian or transgender people in our congregation. You know, I just don't know. I think it was more a social thing in general. Because at school, there was a kid that was gay who was clearly- I mean, people talked about him that way. He never self-identified that way. But people talked about him that way. And he was always a little bit ostracized, you know. It was fine, he was weird that was ok, he was strange, you know as long as you didn't have anything to do with him he would be ok. And so you know it was clear in my social life in general. And there must have been something in Church, too. Or you know maybe its just kids making jokes like kids do you know about gay people or about anything else. You know, that sort of makes you realize: Oh, I can't be that because it's not ok. Obviously people are making fun of that.

For this participant it seems to be unclear, for him, if his belief that being GLB was bad came from the church, outside society or a combination. Participant # 7 echoes some of the same sentiments when he recalls:

I don't remember ever hearing anything about homosexuality or gay people, growing up in the Church or anything. So I don't know where I got that this was so evil. I don't know whether it was just the fact that I didn't fit in. That as a kid

you pick up- Oh you're different, that means you're bad. That's all I can think. My parents never talked to me about it. I don't remember any sermons being preached in Church condemning homosexuals or anything. But somewhere I picked up that homosexuality was very, very bad.

It is interesting to consider how these participants received these messages about a GLB identity. Participant # 10 suggests:

The assumption was heterosexual. It wasn't talked about very much. And I just don't remember ever them talking about sexuality and sex. I remember the assumption being heterosexual.

Perhaps there is something to be said about messages that people receive when something is not talked about at all. This was explored further by the researcher with the question:

How did not hearing about homosexuality at all affect you? Participant # 5 answered:

I think it had probably not a devastating effect. But you know, it was a hard thing for me to deal with. A hard thing to go through. And I think it's a bad thing for any kid to have to go through as they're trying to figure out who they are. You know, just- ok so you have a feeling that is not ok. But you can't really talk about it because to talk about it means that you have to you know somehow you have to confess. You know, and in the act of confession then you're labeled. And you're, you know, gonna be in the same boat as that kid over there that everybody's making fun of. You know, so we don't wanna be that person. I think it's a terrible thing. But then you know it's like out of my head. So I could just totally ignore it or write it all off. By the time I got to college, it was a justice issue for me, too. And that's probably how I- maybe how I sublimated it. It's kind of like- well, you know, of course gay people should you know be able to you know, I mean- it's not- it can't be wrong. There's a justice thing here. That these people didn't choose to be this way and so therefore- but I still wouldn't have said I was one of them because I wasn't ready for all of what that meant.

This participant explains that there was not even a forum to discuss what he was feeling at the time. The effect that this had on him was to mirror the church's silence and later sublimate his wishes for his own identity. One idea to consider is if silence indicates aspects of shame, which will be further explored.

It is important to acknowledge the one outlier in this study, who felt she filtered no negative messages about GLB. Participant # 6 states:

I don't remember having negative messages. Which is kind of interesting because my mother obviously did. But when my friend came out to me in high school, I was like: "Well, yeah, so, God still loves you." Why can't you be, you know- not a problem. And so I don't know if- but we never talked about it in youth group. We never- I don't ever remember hearing anything over the pulpit. It just wasn't- yeah. As far as I know, nothing- it was just not talked about. So my frame of reference was like- Of course God loves us. God loves you, God loves homosexuals. It's not bad. I don't know where I got that message from- which I find slightly humorous because it's like obviously people were getting other messages. And my mother obviously got a different message than the one I got.

This participant assumed that the lack of messages about homosexuality indicated that it was a benign issue. She does however, recognize that other people in her congregation, including her mother, received a different message. In the next section effects these messages will be further examined through the coming out experiences of the participants.

Coming Out Experiences

All of the participants were asked to describe their coming out experiences. Some clarifying questions included: How did you come to realize you were GLB? What were you feeling during that time? How did your family react? What reactions did you receive from the church? The first section will show how people came to realize their own GLB feelings and identity. This section will be divided into three subsections including; self-realization, coming out to family and friends, and coming out to the church.

Self Realization/Coming out to Oneself

Four themes that arose in the interview process around how people came to realize they were GLB; a gradual acceptance of a GLB identity (n=8) versus a clarifying moment of acceptance (n=2), childhood indications (n=8), a significant relationship (n=5), and being in an environment with more GLB people (n=7).

Eight of the participants felt that they had a more gradual acceptance of their GLB identity. Participant # 1 recalls:

So the process of my coming out to myself was extremely slow relative to lots of other kids. And really gradual. And by the time I came out, I was getting ready to move to California and came and became a part of the Mennonite Church pretty soon after that here in the congregation in San Francisco.

Participant # 2 speaks of his slow acceptance and links it to his more fluid ideas about good and evil, saying:

I came to accept it very slowly, and there was a lot of turmoil. I'm not describing it, but I'm sure there was a lot of anguish. I'd be a disappointment to my parents; I'd be a disappointment to a lot of different people. It just seemed like it was gonna be really hard at that time in society. It wasn't like I wanted to trade it and be something else. But it was just sort of like, you know, this isn't gonna be so easy. It's gonna be hard. And that was troubling. I grew up, first of all- I didn't have this rigid idea of good and evil, right and wrong, that some people seem to have really grown up with. I just didn't have that.

This participant's turmoil appears to be linked more to how society would react to him, rather than hard feelings about himself.

While most participants talked about a gradual acceptance, two participants talked about clarifying moments. Participant # 4 expresses:

I was away for the summer. And I don't know what it was. I think it was that there was this guy. I was the coordinator of this summer program. And one of my participants- I don't know, I was just incredibly attracted to him. And it was- I don't know if it was more than I must have been attracted to other guys in the past or if it was just that I had a new openness that I was like- I don't know. I didn't stop myself from feeling attracted to him. And at some point I was just like- oh, if it's ok as a general concept, then it's ok for me. And I was just like- that was kind of my moment, in the middle of this past summer. Where I was just like- ok. So I had those feelings and I don't know what I'm gonna do about them. Like, he was straight. It wasn't like I was gonna pursue a relationship with him, but- that was like incredibly, incredibly freeing. Yeah, freeing is the best word, I think. It was a huge burden that was just gone.

Participant # 7 details an emotional moment of acceptance when he narrates:

But after that letter of- when she said she was getting married, and my thought was: "I'm gay" that was the same time another movie came out called "Ordinary People." But it's a story of a young high school student who was in a boating accident with his brother and the brother drowned. And he's living with all this guilt that he was responsible for his brother's death. And he's depressed and suicidal. And the whole movie is about that. But at one point when he's attempted suicide and he's back with his psychiatrist, he flashes back and you see the scene of them on the boat in the storm and they're both holding on to each other. And the brother's the one who lets go of him. And he flashes back to that and he can finally realize: I wasn't responsible. It was the brother who let go of him. And somehow that movie flashed to me: I'm not responsible for my sexuality. This is how I was made. And I was just overwhelmed by that realization. And I remember walking out of the theater, it was pouring rain. It was about a two-mile walk. So I was pretty soaked by the time I got home. I was crying, crying for joy that I was not responsible for who I am. And this is- I prayed, I fasted, I did everything I could- offering myself to God to change me. And I was not being changed. So this is who I was meant to be. And I remember so clearly the next morning looking myself in the mirror and just saying: You're gay. And smiling, and smiling. I mean, from the heart smiling and accepting that. So that was the coming out to myself piece.

It is important to note, that unlike some of the participants, who had a slower acceptance, both of these participants indicate in their narratives having had much more black and white images of good and evil as well as sin.

Though a specific question about childhood experiences was not mentioned, eight participants included it in their narratives. Participant # 2 also says:

But of course in retrospect, you know- I could trace it right back. Like- oh, you know, look at that thing in first grade, and look at that thing in grade six. But I don't think at the time I really knew what that was. Not surprisingly, I wasn't exactly butch growing up. You know, I was more into music and theater and academics. Not sports.

This participant may be linking the childhood indications to his gender expression, like Participant # 7 who shares:

I was extremely shy as a grade schooler. I was terrified of other people. And I didn't fit in with the other boys. I would just always play by myself or play Barbies with the girls.

For these two participants there seemed to be recognition of difference between themselves and other boys, but at the time they did not recognize this difference as indicating they were GLB.

Five participants mention an awareness of attraction to people of the same-sex.

Participant # 1 remembers:

And it sort of slowly dawned on me even in high school that my interests were more in boys than girls. Although I never did anything about that when I was in high school. Not even having a date or going out or even consciously thinking about it.

Participant # 10 reports a similar experience saying:

I knew I was attracted to woman but I didn't think it was anything serious. It made it hard for me to figure out my sexual identity because it was a part of my religious identity to be straight and it was very much a part of the rural Mennonite church that it wasn't an option.

For both of these participants the awareness of attraction to people of the same gender did not necessarily translate into recognizing that they were GLB or even had homosexual feelings. Participant # 10 touches on the link between her sexual identity and her GLB identity, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Three participants were able to name and recognize their feelings as being explicitly homosexual. Participant # 9 expresses:

I remember being a freshman in high school in gym class and fantasizing about marrying a boy in my class and what our kids would look like. I'm pretty sure that by the time I was a senior year in high school I knew I was gay and I was okay with that.

Participant # 3 remembers:

I always was attracted to guys, even through middle school and stuff. But I didn't think of myself as gay then. It wasn't until high school that I would identify as that. And I'd be attracted to these boys in my choir or whatnot but I couldn't act on that or tell anyone about it.

Both of these participants acknowledged their same-sex attractions and soon integrated them into a GLB identity before the age of 18 and before telling anyone about their feelings. Participant # 4's story varies about from the previous two as he says:

I think probably at least like the first explicit gay feelings I had were when I was in sixth grade. Maybe there's some stuff before that, but I don't really know. It was like a problem. And a problem that needed to be addressed. And so I-So it was something I definitely never ever talked about. Never gave any hints to anyone that I was feeling this. And I worked in myself. I tried really hard to just suppress them or- and of course I would act out on them. Like by looking at pornography and other stuff and then I would feel really guilty. I would be self-loathing. Oh, I'm not gonna do that again. And God forgive me. And always it was followed immediately with a deep sense of guilt. And a prayer. It'd take me a while to get back and feel like- oh, I'm ok again. So that was pretty much my mentality until- somewhere in high school I don't know what broke. It wasn't much of a break. But it was like I realized that homosexuality was just *a* sin, it wasn't *the* biggest sin. I was like- oh; it's just the thing that I'm struggling with. And other people are struggling with other stuff. And this is the thing I have to struggle with. And so still I felt really guilty about whenever I failed around it.

For this person, homosexuality was a feeling and a sin for him to deal with, but not an indication of a GLB identity, as it was for Participant # 9 and # 3.

Five participants talk about romantic relationships as a part of their coming out process. Participant # 6 states:

And then I started questioning everybody's- how they were dating. I was talking to my friends about how- well, how do you know you're in love? That was my question to everybody- How do you know you're in love? How do you know you like that person? And I was talking to my roommate at the time a lot. And I started reading- I started checking out books- I didn't really check them out. I just took them out of the Church library. Read some really dense books in the Church library that like aren't really actually helpful. I hope they're not even there any more. Because we pared down our Church library. I started doing stuff- reading like that. And I was volunteering at Under One Roof, which is an AIDS organization in the Castro. And I started reading different books through them that were on their shelves or something- I was buying books. And about- I mean, they really weren't necessarily about my life. Some of them were about women coming out after they had been married and stuff that. That was one that I remember buying and reading. And I was talking to my best friend at the time. We had been friends since- we were writing back and forth. But we had been friends since fifth grade. And we were writing back and forth and we were talking

a lot. And I did the most stereotypical thing. I feel- supposedly fell in love with my best friend.

This participant was questioning relationships in general and educating herself about GLB people, but did not fully realize her own identity until she fell in love with a woman. Participant # 10 has a very similar story. She tells:

So when I went away to college I began to realize that there were a lot of women who were lesbian and I started to explore GSA, but I still was not convinced that it was who I should be or that it was an option and I think it was in conflict in with my basic identity. I almost got married to a guy who was a Mennonite, but when he asked I just couldn't see it. So I went to seminary and it was coming down here to the bay area and I ran into all these lesbians at seminary and they decided I was a lesbian and they took me to a concert of a lesbian musician and all these lesbians were there, but within that six months I met my partner who is still my partner to this day.

Participant # 10 cites romantic relationships with both a male and female as a part of her process of coming out. She could not see herself marrying the man, but could see herself in the relationship with her long-term partner. Participant # 7 also felt that a relationship with a person of the opposite sex contributed to his realization of being GLB. He narrates:

All through college, there was a woman that I just assumed we would get married. We had been very close in high school. When we got to college, that's the first time we ever actually spent significant time together. And in fact, our first week of college, it looked like we were gonna go full steam ahead. We were like no no no no, we gotta put the brakes on this. Need to go to school first. And by the time we finish college she was then ready to start a relationship. I was in so much turmoil about everything else that I just was not paying attention to that at all. We both ended up in voluntary service- she in a different city. She was wondering, why aren't you putting the moves on? And I was dealing with all my own sexuality stuff. And so she started dating someone else who was a friend of mine- that I found out about and was like- Well, ok if she wants to date him, she's gotta let me know if she's interested. And she was waiting for me to rescue her. And so we just were not communicating at all about that. And so when this other friend proposed to her, she accepted that. And then she wrote me a letter and said, "I'm getting married." And my first thought was: I'm gay. There was this like- Oh my

God, I've been using this fantasy of marrying her to prevent me from really seeing that no, this is not really just a problem I have. That I am gay.

The reality of this person marrying another man caused this participant to see the reality of his identity as a gay man. His realization appears to be very stark compared to participant # 10 who just thought marrying a man did not feel quite right.

Four participants cite being in an environment where they could see and be around other GLB people as crucial to their self-realization of their GLB identity.

Participant # 1 greatly attributes his coming out to meeting other gay people. He says:

And so I guess the first point at which I was really clear with myself about that was after I left Bethel (Mennonite College) and got to grad school at the University of Iowa. And there, there was a pretty sizeable – tiny, but sizeable – group of gay students. And so I got to know some of the students there and sort of woke up to the fact that there is this other aspect to culture and way of living. Got relatively quickly synchronized with myself and said- oh yeah, so that's why I haven't been so interested in dating women for my whole time out on the dating circuit.

Participant # 2 tells:

And then I moved to Washington, D.C. and there were just more openly gay people around. And so I was thinking about it more. And one of the things I did was I volunteered at a theater, which had a lot of openly gay people. And that's the first time I ever really got to know people that had some things in common with me, I think. But, either I was a slow learner or a slow acceptor.

For participant # 2 meeting other GLB people contributed to his slow acceptance of his GLB identity, whereas for participant # 1 it played a more crucial role.

Coming Out to Family and Friends

Participants were asked directly about their coming out experiences and reactions from family members. Two participants (n=2) mentioned specific stories of coming out to friends while eight (n=8) did not. Of the ten participants, nine (n=9) had come out to family members and one participant (n=1) had not. Two major themes were found when

looking at the responses to this research question. The first theme that will be discussed is the creation of distance between participants and their family as a result of coming out. The second theme is the church's potential influence on family member reactions.

Distance between participants and family members is a connecting factor between the narratives of five participants (n=5). Two participants (n=2) mention a period of not talking and not going to family gatherings as a result of coming out. Participant # 6 tells:

I went back to Illinois in August that year. And I was gonna talk to them then. And it was actually the last time our whole family has been together. Our oldest brother and his two kids at the time and his wife and my brother. This is- August of '97 is the last time that my family has all been together in one state.

Participant # 6 feels that her family has not been all together for over 10 years as a direct result of her coming out. Participant # 10 mentions a period of not talking to family members and receiving painful messages when she recalls:

I am very close to my mother who is the Mennonite and she didn't talk to me for 4 or 5 years. And my uncle who was very involved in the Mennonite church wrote me a letter that said it would have been easier for my parents if I would have died and that was really hard and it is still hard to see him.

For both of these participants the distance created is very concrete either through not talking or not seeing each other. Both participants mention in their interview a gradual lessening of the distance between family members, but still a lasting effect. Participant # 6 says:

But what did change then was that they did go to a PFLAG meeting. They haven't been back since. But they did go. That was one of the things- "We'll go." And they started using my last name. And it was kind of like an acknowledgement of- for me it was like: "We don't accept" – and she'll actually say this – "We don't accept your lifestyle, but we acknowledge." It was an acknowledgement. So I have a very fine line with my parents where I can accept where- the little baby steps that they have made. They ask about my partner.

Participant # 10 talks about other members of her family who are supportive. She tells:

My great-grandmother said to me once “Don’t let people bug you about it too much because they are going to be surprised who’s in heaven” So, some of these strong, independent women who were Mennonite were supportive and my father was but my mother she couldn’t. She asked me once to show her in the scripture where you could be a lesbian and still be saved. She has come around a bit more.

The presence of supportive people in her family of origin has helped her to feel some welcoming space with her family. However, she acknowledges, like participant # 6, that her mother does not fully accept her lesbian identity.

Three more participants (n=3) talk about coming out creating emotional difficulties with family members, even though they never stopped talking to or seeing their family members. Participant #2 recalls:

Yeah. I think ultimately they probably felt like it wasn’t right. Or at least the sort of thought it was. But they didn’t feel so strongly about that. It’s more like- it was partly, how was it going to be for me? And for my mother- well, what will my friends say? It’s a little bit like- it was considered a sort of a shameful thing maybe, you know, for her, in her mind. It wouldn’t be easy for her to talk about it for a long time to other people.

Participant # 1 and # 5 are brothers from the same family. Participant # 5, who was the first to come out remembers:

My parents and I were close. So we went- I went to the relief sale in Fresno and they were there. So it was kind of- a little bit of a family get-together. But, and so I told them, you know. And it was really uncomfortable and really- you know, our family doesn’t talk about real personal feelings very easily or very- it’s not that we avoid them. And it’s not that we don’t do it. But we don’t do it in you know- we don’t do emotions very well. You know, we don’t handle each other’s emotions very well.

Participant # 1 felt that the process was a bit easier for him since his brother was the first to come out. He says:

And so then I went and had a weekend at home with the folks and we talked and cried and laughed and in two or three days, that was all kind of behind us. It was a fairly quick thing. But for them, it was- oh, so we have a second child who has this issue to deal with.

For this family, having to talk about sexual identity elicited emotions. This created some discomfort since the family was not apt to talking about emotions.

Participant # 9 discusses the turmoil that he felt when he came out to his family.

He expresses:

Then I had a conversation with my parents and with my brothers. My mom wondered if I had considered any of the reparative orientation therapies and I told her that I didn't think that was very useful. I came out to them 19 years ago this weekend...it was Easter weekend and I'd asked for some time with the family and Saturday night I left at midnight and drove 70 mph through a blizzard back home to VA. Which one could look at like "my life doesn't really seem to matter." The way I thought of it then was I just need to get away from my parents and get back to a safer place. But it was a few years later where I started thinking about the relationship between driving through a blizzard at 70 mph and uncertainty about self-worth go together pretty closely. Oh, it's so fascinating to feel how icky my insides feel upon remembering that time. The ickiness.

This participant shares that his parents did later accept his sexual identity, but he still feels very emotional when thinking about that experience.

Of the nine participants who are out to their family members, five participants (n=5) now feel that their parents are very accepting of their sexual identities. However, four participants (n=4) do not feel that their parents are fully accepting. For participant # 8, her sexual identity was never accepted by her mother, before she passed away. She says:

My mother only told a few of her close friends about it (being a lesbian). When my partner and I got married she wrote us this letter that she loved us and that Ruth would always be apart of our family but then she had to throw in that little piece about...but I still don't agree with your lifestyle. Here you are sending me this letter and you are going to throw that in there and we were so upset and like send that letter back to her but unfortunately at the time she was ill and passed shortly after that. So it was really sad.

This participant describes deep sadness that her mother died while they were arguing about her sexual identity.

In the study there is one participant who has not yet come out to his family, however, he talks about the distance that is already present with his family members. Participant # 4 says:

I have a distant enough relationship with my family that it's not a problem. And this is not the only issue that my father and I disagree on. So I mean, we're not really on good terms anyway. And so, I mean, if he ruins that bridge, he can burn it and it won't- I mean, maybe I think it won't affect me. But I just don't think it's gonna bother me that much. My sister – my religious sister – I wonder, I really wonder how she'll deal with it. And I feel like it might create some distance. But she'll probably still make an effort to love me and my sin.

The emotional distance between him and his father is described as being attributed to differences in views, including the view on homosexuality. He feels his sister will make an effort to maintain a relationship but in the context of viewing his sexual identity as a sin.

Two participants talk about coming out experiences with their friends as being their first time coming out to someone. For both of these participants, the friend was from the Mennonite Community. One participant speaks of a very positive experience, while the other participant tells a very negative experience. Participant # 3 describes coming out to his friend when he attended a Mennonite High School. He remembers:

I told one person my senior year of high school that I was close with – a girl – that I was gay. That was the first person I came out to. It was kind of just like feeling the waters and she kind of reacted really badly to it. And just not handle it- especially at that age, too. You don't really know who you are as an individual. And you're beginning to question things, but not so much as when you're in college. And so it was a shocking revelation and it destroyed her.

This was the first time this participant disclosed his sexual identity and he received a very negative reaction from a close friend in the Mennonite community. Participant # 4 received a much more supportive from his Mennonite friend. He describes:

So I kind of worked on him by- And so when we were in Egypt together, we read this article that was from- it was some Stephen Fowler article about reading the spirit and about how- it was like a reinterpretation of ex four or something. Or fifteen or something. Where Peter has the vision of the unclean animals and then all these gentiles get let into the Church. And before it was just an exclusively Jewish thing. And so his whole argument is about letting the spirit move and change ideas. And so we read that article together and then we watched the documentary, "For the Bible Tells Me So." On YouTube. And then, thank you whoever put that on YouTube. And then I told him right after we watched it. Cuz I had to get a sense that it was safe before I could tell him. And so after that article and after that movie, it sounded like he was in a place that he could wrap his mind around it. So I was still insanely nervous. But I told him. And he was accepting. It was the most remarkable thing. I'll never forget that night when I told him that. And he just held my hand and asked me questions about it

The first experience of coming out to someone appears to be very impacting when looking at the trajectories of these two people's stories. This will be discussed further in the discussion chapter.

Church Responses

Participants were asked about the reactions they received from their local churches and larger churches. Eight participants (n=8) found the San Francisco Mennonite Church relatively early in their coming out processes and all expressed that this church has been open and affirming of their GLB identities. Five (n=5) expressed negative reactions from their home churches or the larger church structure. Three (n=3) describe a feeling of distance or being an outsider in their home churches and two (n=2) feel the church to be directly responsible for the distance created in their families.

Participant # 1 describes the support he felt from the church in San Francisco during his coming out process when he says:

It was a fairly difficult year. In part I worked through that reaction by coming out in a letter that I wrote to the Mennonite- the National Publication for the General Conference Church. And so then of course I had to go home and come out to my parents and the rest of the family and to my friends and sort of give them some advance warning that this letter was gonna come out in which I expressed my

disagreement with the denomination's position on gay members in the Church. And then I guess after I got that out of my system and got the letter out, and discovered or worked out which of my former friendships were gonna be sustainable after that coming out event, it sort of calmed down again. So there was a little bit of drama and frustration during that time. But I must say I was greatly eased by having a good, strong, supportive congregation here. So I felt like there was a political battle, but it wasn't an emotional personal battle that I was fighting.

This participant clearly describes the support that he felt from his local church juxtaposed with the discrimination that he felt from the larger church structure. The community also helped the discrimination to feel less personal and more political.

Participant # 7 echoes the sentiments about support from the San Francisco Church during his coming out process. He expresses:

And so when I moved to Berkeley that was- from day one, I'm gay. And there was no question about that. And I came to this Church and I'm gay. And there were clearly other gay people there. And it just wasn't an issue. I remember the first few years, every two or three years they would have some like education hour kind of on what is bible study and what's our position. Cuz there would be new people who would come to the Church who weren't quite on board with where we were at. But at some point it just stopped being- like, no we're not talking about it any more. You can figure it out on your own. We're not going through this again. And I loved that.

Though homosexuality is and was a big issue in the larger church, this participant describes his local church has a sort of safe haven, where it was a non-issue.

Five participants felt that they suffered from direct negative consequences of being GLB identified. Participant # 2 describes being fired from his job with the Mennonite Church. He details:

That was in about 1983. And my bosses knew, but they sort of didn't care. As long as I was living my life quietly and not making it a political issue for the Church, they didn't care. I was sort of a regional director for about seven Mennonite Voluntary Service units in the western part of the U.S. So it was my job to get the resumes and sort of match the people and the jobs in the households and that sort of thing. So there was a household here and each household had a

household leader. And one year, probably about my second year here, one of the guys that was in the house was gay. And I don't know that either one of us were particularly out at the time, very much- well, not very open about it. But we became good friends. He lives in Washington, D.C. His best friend, from Heston College (Mennonite College), was on the faculty at Heston. And this guy at Heston was kind of in love with the guy out here. And this guy out here of course was writing him, and telling him about all the things we were doing together. So the guy at Heston was kind of getting jealous of me, thinking- oh, they've got something going on that's what I've always wanted. Nothing was going on, but he was feeling that frustration. He goes back to his home Church in rural Oregon and started telling his Pastor this in confidence. And the Pastor decides his role is to call the President of the Mennonite Board of Admissions and report that one of their staff is a gay man and what are they gonna do about it. So basically the upshot was I went back the following week, was leading an orientation by day and by night I was negotiating when I was going to be leaving this position. So it was a hard week.

This story illustrates that it was not safe to be out for this participant. It resulted in the loss of a job that he enjoyed.

Participant # 9 talks about his experience in trying to pursue a theology degree from a Mennonite institution. He states:

I went to AMBS (Associate Mennonite Biblical Seminary) at a time where it was clear that they didn't want gay and lesbian people in their master of divinity program and I was significantly frustrated from that experience.

He expresses the direct discrimination felt by not being able to pursue the degree of his choice simply because of his sexual identity.

The parents of participants # 1 and # 5 were asked to leave their home church as a result of the stance on homosexuality in the church.

But you know, not willingly, not happily. Because, I mean, they helped start that Church. They were heavily invested in it. And I think it was painful for them. It was a little bit painful for me. So it must have been more painful for them. To see people that we had spent all of our lives with, that we had grown up with, decide that- no, they could not- that it was wrong and so therefore they could support my parents leaving and not leave themselves.

For these participants the pain that was felt by their parents losing their church community affected them as well.

Two participants express that they did not feel the church gave their parents any support around having a GLB child. They feel that this lack of support contributed to the distance between them. Participant # 8 says:

I wrote my parents a letter and they reacted very...my mom was very upset about it...she was you know crying about it and stuff. And that is the thing that really bums me out is that I feel that she was never really able to come to terms with that and I do feel like it was the church's fault. They must have been preaching against it for her to have those thoughts like, "it's not right and it's a sin" I don't remember hearing that growing up...I just feel like she only told a few of her close friends about it.

Participant # 6 answers the question, "What support did your parents receive from the church?":

I don't think they got any. I don't think they've gotten any. I don't know- I'm not entirely sure if their current Pastor was there at the time or not. And the support that they would've gotten from the Church was that we're praying with you. It's not- it would not have been positive for me. It would've been- We're sorry you're going through this and God loves you.

In other words there was no support in their local church around acceptance of their child's GLB identity.

Impact of Being Mennonite on Being GLB

Participants were asked, "How has being born and raised Mennonite, impacted your feelings about being GLB?" Participants expressed both negative impacts (n=10) and positive impacts (n=9). In the negative category participants mentioned low self esteem and self-worth (n=4) and feeling discrimination, individually and as a group (n=6). In the positive category participants mentioned having a supportive local

Mennonite community (n=8). Some participants talked about feeling little impact because they feel removed from the conflict (n=3).

Four participants thought that being raised Mennonite and being GLB had an effect on their self-worth and self-esteem. Participant # 3 describes:

For a while through the coming out process, I had really bad self-esteem because I thought what I was doing was wrong on one level kinda. And I still struggle with that a little bit. I'm pretty comfortable with who I am. And I don't question it any more. And I'm definitely at terms with it. And I love myself. But it's still there, and underlying tone kind of.

This connection of feeling that being GLB is wrong to low self-esteem is echoed what participant # 7 says:

I went through high school and struggled with these feelings – and praying and fasting and just wanting this to be removed. And yet finding myself so attracted to other guys. I didn't know what to do. And I thought of committing suicide. The whole verse in the bible about 'better to chop off your hand if it offends you than to go to hell.' And so I figured I was going to hell and I better kill myself now before I do something. Because if I kill myself now, I may go to heaven. Such twisted, sad thinking. But that was a real thought.

The same sentiments are expressed by Participant # 4. He tells:

I mean, I would definitely say it was a huge, huge negative impact on my identity. Like- made me depressed, made me guilty, made me wanna hurt myself or fix myself or whatever. And I mean I guess you could say that was still part of a Mennonite identity cause I was going to a Mennonite Church.

For these participants, the impact of their religious identity on their feelings on having a GLB identity appear to be stark and profound.

Six participants express feeling personal or group discrimination. Participant # 1 talks about the Denominational Statement that condemns homosexual acts. He says:

I certainly felt that sense of alienation after the Saskatoon resolution and during that meeting, with respect to the larger Church. But I still had my own congregation to hang on to. The disappointment or unhappiness was kind of theoretical. It was more theological than it was personal.

Participant # 6 expresses the discrimination from the larger church structure that her church is dealing with as a result of their pastor marrying a gay couple. She expresses:

The issues that are going on now is more affecting of me. The concept that they wanna sanction our pastor. You know, and that's just- I agree with what has been said in the last month from our congregation. And personally, in reality the people who may or may not get married in the next two years- an official ceremony with our pastor marrying somebody. We could be the catalyst for that. My partner I could be the catalyst for that. For them to take further action on. So to me it reminds me of a parent/child relationship.

On a very personal level one participant lost his job with the Mennonite church, another participant could not go to the Mennonite Divinity School and another participant expresses a knowing that he could not have a job with in the Mennonite Church structure. This feelings of descrimination produced feelings of frustration and saddness for these three participants.

Eight participants mention their open and accepting Mennonite church as having a positive impact on their feelings about being GLB. Participant # 4 talks about the impact of his church when he says:

And I'm lucky though. I'm lucky that I had enough of a supportive community to get me through to a point where I could gain supportive- like all inclusive. Like I had enough getting me through to that point- to get me alive to the point where I needed to be so that I could re-examine things and accept myself and dismiss that as a problem

Essentially this participant is saying that the supportive Mennonite community helped him, come alive again. This illustrates the strong positive impact that a supportive Mennonite community can have on an individual.

Other participants (n=3) speak to being able to feel removed from the larger church conflict by having a supportive local congregation and living in an open city.

Participant #8 says:

I don't really have any issues with it. Maybe it would be different if I was in rural Illinois but when you are in the bay area I don't think it has much of an impact.

Participant # 5 relates to this idea when he says:

It's great. It means that it can be a non-issue. It means- and living in a city like San Francisco, an area like the Bay Area. It just means that it can be a non-issue. That I can live the rest of my life without you know, having to hide something or explain something or be uncomfortable about something. You know, it's just yeah- you know, I can introduce my partner to people. We can have people over to our house. We can live very openly and comfortably and you know, usually even not think about the fact that we're not a straight couple like the rest of- like the majority of society. And people might be thinking about us differently than they think about some of their other friends. It just doesn't feel like that's there at all. Yeah, it's- I like living in a bubble.

For these participants, the normality and acceptance of being GLB in their churches and community has had a positive impact.

Experiences in Therapy

Participants were asked if they have ever had formal therapy. Of the ten participants, only two had sought formal therapy. These participants were asked subsequent questions about their experience in therapy, such as: Did your therapist have an understanding of what it meant to be GLB? And, did your therapist have an understanding of what it means to be raised Mennonite? Some participants chose to elaborate on why they did not seek out therapy.

Both participants who sought psychotherapy felt that the therapist had a great understanding and acceptance of what it meant to be GLB. However, they both felt that the therapist did not have a great understanding of what it meant to be Mennonite.

Participant # 9 says:

I might have mentioned it (being Mennonite) but my recollection was that the whole Mennonite thing wasn't understood and so I kinda couched it as religious involvement and that seemed sufficient for that context.

Participant # 3 says when asked about the therapist understanding of being GLB:

All my therapists have been- it's just a piece of who you are. Let's talk about it. They don't look at it as a negative thing.

When Participant # 3 is asked, "Have you found a therapist who has had an understanding of your Mennonite identity?" He says:

Not really. I think they struggle for that. I'm sure they've seen people and have studied people with like extreme religious- Like a lot of people come out in the Mormon faith. I feel like I've met a couple people that were raised Mormon or Jehovah's Witness that are gay now. And those Churches don't accept it and are very closed. They're similar- I mean, they're different, way different beliefs than Mennonites, but similar experiences of being a gay person in a tight knit religious community I guess. And I'm sure therapists study that and whatnot. But often times when I tell someone I'm Mennonite or was raised Mennonite, or a therapist, they don't quite know what that means. Like you can study the religious beliefs, but it's so much more than just the religious beliefs. Cuz it's like this community. There's so many things that aren't spoken that are just inherent. And they're learned some way. You have to experience it – that type of community – to really get it.

Two participants chose to share why they have not sought formal therapy.

Participant # 5 talks about his community support. He says:

And the process of coming out was pretty supportive and pretty smooth. Certainly from within the Church here in San Francisco. And from my immediate family. And so those were the most important parts of my life. I didn't really feel troubled by it or tormented or feel like it was that hard a thing.

The support of his community including his open and affirming church caused this participant to feel that he was not in need of therapy. Participant # 4 describes a much different reason for not seeking therapy when he says:

It was something I was too terrified to ever talk about. And I mean I think about it and had I, if I had asked for help, I can only imagine where that would've taken me. Or what road that would've taken me down. And like I hear horror stories – I was a psychology major – and reading stuff about reparative therapy. And I'm thinking- oh my God, that could've been me.

For this participant admitting that he was struggling with issues around sexual identity was too scary to talk about.

Integration and Healing

In this study participants were asked questions about integrating two identities and their personal paths of healing. Participants were asked questions like: Have you ever felt a conflict between your two identities? Why did you decide to leave or stay with in the church? And what has helped you integrate and heal? Of the ten participants, eight have not left the Mennonite Church, while two are no longer practicing Mennonites. Several themes arose in the asking of these questions; re-claiming of a Mennonite identity (n=5), taking action (n=4), and a vision of hope for the future (n=4)

Five participants talk about a claiming or reclaiming of a Mennonite identity that can exist with their gay identity. Participant # 1 states:

And if I were forced to have to choose between my Mennonite identity and being gay, it's kind of an impossible choice because I'm both of those things and can't really prioritize one more than the other. So I would somehow have to struggle to keep those in harmony. So to be in a Church where I neither have to be defensive about being Mennonite or defensive about being gay, but can just take those aspects of my being and work from those – use those as a springboard to live in the world and pursue a spiritual path – that's a valuable thing.

It is as if this participant is refusing to be fragmented. The environmental factor of attending an open and affirming Mennonite Church supports this integration. Participant # 8 says:

I mean I was still Mennonite so I mean it is a part of who I am. It is not a conflict with my identity. It is a conflict with the church.

This participant recognizes the fragmentation that exists in the church body, but does not allow it to exist within herself. This has allowed her to claim her Mennonite identity as well as her GLB identity.

Four participants feel that taking action to advocate for the rights of GLB people within the church has contributed to their integration and healing. Participant # 4 expresses:

I really envision being someone who pushes things in the Church and as my sexual identity develops, that's something I'm gonna be very proud of and very open about in the Church.

The realization that being Mennonite and GLB can exist together has caused this participant to advocate and create change as a part of his integration and healing process.

Participant # 5 also expresses:

I think I've always had a really strong sense of justice. And I don't know where else that would've come from. You know, it's- all the stories growing up about people who died because of what they believed in. And you know, the martyrs and all of the stories of the conscientious objectors in different wars. And MCC workers. And whatever else- all the stories we heard as we were growing up. I think that had an influence on me in terms of my sense of justice. And fighting for the underdog, fighting for the oppressed minority. You know, feeling like you have to stand up for people that can't speak for themselves because nobody else will do it.

Here this person expresses that it has always been apart of his Mennonite identity to fight for justice. He is able to integrate this piece of his identity with advocating for his GLB identity within the church. Participant # 7 has made efforts to connect with people who do not believe GLB people should be a part of the Mennonite church. He details in a story:

It was like ten years ago. And so we were now hosting, and I was asked and I agreed to have him (a non-accepting Mennonite Pastor) be in my apartment. And that I would be a host for him. So he came over to my place. And this was, you know, right at Castro and Market, where I lived. On Market Street. And so we

went out to a restaurant right there and had lunch and watched the boys go by. And I mean, it's the Castro. And I shared with him about my life and he shared with me about his life and his ministry in L.A., which is basically going to, you know, abandoned lots that were being run over with gangs with his bullhorn, and screaming and yelling and preaching at them. But also getting kids out of gangs and starting basketball clubs. And getting them off the streets. And getting them back into their families. And, you know, it's the type of ministry that- you know, Preachers with bullhorns? I'm sorry. That- it's like, get away from me. But I could really respect the results that he was getting. And I talked to him about being enrolled with MVS (Mennonite Voluntary Service) and everything that our Church is doing. And he's never made a scene at conference again about sexuality. I don't know whether he voted for Prop 8 or not. But his voice has been a little bit moderated. And there again it's like I just truly believe that when people get to know each other that we find our common humanity. Maybe I'm naïve. I don't know. But I just think that you know, like I said in Church, one of my core beliefs is that we're all related. And we're all- we all share a common humanity. And whatever divisions we make up in our mind, if we just get to know each other we'll see that we're friends.

These connections have been a part of this participant's path to integration and healing.

Four participants directly mention a vision of hope and inclusion that keeps them in the Mennonite Church. Participant # 5 says:

I don't dwell on it too much because I think it will change. Maybe not in my lifetime, but soon. Before too long, it'll change. There's just been a lot of evidence of that.

Participant # 2 states:

But so I have kind of a long view of it. I guess I have a really high tolerance for pain, I don't know. I can live with those incongruities.

Like Participant # 5, Participant # 2 talks about having a long-term view of inclusion of GLB people in the church. However, he also talks about his personal qualities of having a high tolerance for pain and dissonance.

Of the ten participants, two decided to leave the church, while one left the church and returned. Participant # 9 expresses:

The moving to San Francisco included clearly the question, "Do I want to stay in the Mennonite Church?" and I need to go to an affirming church where they

aren't going to kick me out so I can decide if I want to leave. I started attending Metropolitan Community Church in the evenings and Mennonite Church in the morning. So there was something about the values of how we do community and the values of the nonviolent pacifism stuff. It was hard to sit in a church that had a flag in the sanctuary. The Mennonites that I have been around have an awareness and experience of being around the world. I couldn't leave it.

Part of this participant's process of integration and healing involved leaving the church for a period of time in order to see if he wanted to stay.

Two participants no longer identify as practicing Mennonites. Both express pain around the initial loss of this community. Participant # 3 struggled with chemical dependency and feels that the conflict between his GLB identity and Mennonite identity played a role in his illness. He says:

And I think a lot of that was filling the void of when I left the Church, my community. There was a hole in me, like a void. I was raised in such a tight-knit community where everyone knew each other and everyone helped each other. There's just this unspoken sense of love and community and kind of pride I guess that kind of binds people. Like where I was raised. And so losing that, losing my family, feeling like something I can't control has kind of distanced me from them and pushed me away, I think definitely played a piece in that. And I used drugs and alcohol to numb out and not think about that stuff and to kind of fill that void. The biggest thing for me was just to check out. I didn't wanna deal with stuff. And I think my upbringing and my loss of family and that kind of stuff had a huge huge piece of that.

Participant # 10 feels a sense of nostalgia when she expresses:

The stories come back to me...I remember sitting and watching all the Mennonite women make quilts and them reading and I remember being there in the summer time and those are strong images of how important the community is. And I remember this man died in the whole community coming together. So those images are still very Mennonite in my mind and the sense of community and being together and the knowledge of my Swiss Mennonite last year and hearing the stories of my grandfather who was a conscientious objector in WWII and how that was very much a part of his identity, the non-violence. Hearing the songs of my Mennonite youth, the hymns.

Both of these participants have been able to find some healing and integration by carrying their Mennonite pieces or finding aspects of their Mennonite upbringing in other communities. Participant # 10 reports:

I have found a wonderful (Presbyterian) church, which has included both of those identities cause it resonates with a lot of the theological values of the Mennonite Church, the service, the centrality of the scripture. I am very much a Christian lesbian and it is the Mennonite church that has grounded me in that. It gave me a sense of family and the lesbian community has all those things too, you know there are a lot of gatherings. That sense of community I still look for it and try to create it.

This participant has integrated aspects of her Mennonite identity into her identity as a Presbyterian and as a lesbian woman. Participant # 3 feels that he has also tried to create community as a tool for integration and healing. He says:

I tried to recreate my own family with my friends and my peers and my professors in college. And out here in California, I definitely attached to work a lot to kind of create my own community. But it's not the same. I think it's just different. I haven't found anything that's the same as that- that kind of community and the tightness and just- I don't know, it's like everyone's related. Kind of like that. Like even if you don't know someone, it's like they're family in a way. Or if you needed help, you could go to them and they would help you. And out here, it's like you don't always have that. I have that with my close friends, but it's not like a whole community of that. But the cool thing is, too, with getting sober- I kind of found that a little bit in the AA and recovery community. It's very- like it's spiritually oriented, which is a cool parallel to my childhood. And it's people just helping each other and trying to be a better person and supporting someone when they're sick or if they need help or if they're struggling with their recovery. It's just being there for people and showing up. Which I think is very similar. Which is cool. I've kind of recreated that out here in a way, through that.

This participant expresses some healing and integration but still a sense of loss in not being able to find a community that is quite the same.

This chapter revealed, in depth, the findings of this project. The major themes discussed were: Mennonite identity, church messages on sexuality, coming out experiences, impact of being Mennonite on being GLB, experiences in therapy and

integration and healing. The following chapter will link the findings from this research to findings in the literature review, discuss limitations of the study, and propose ideas for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The former chapter illustrates the major findings of this research. In the discussion chapter, the researcher will juxtapose the major findings with the literature review. Limitations of this project will be shared. The researcher will also discuss the implication that this project has for the field of social work. This chapter will be structured by themes discussed in the literature review as well as major themes in the findings.

The Mennonite Church and Mennonite Identity

The answers given by the participants of this study mostly concur with the research found in the literature review. The literature review notes the emphasis on community, being a large aspect of a Mennonite identity. In the findings, it is shown that seven out of ten participants mention community as one of the defining aspects of their identity as a Mennonite. In the literature review, the core religious beliefs, of adult baptism and pacifism, are also detailed as potential defining factors. The research shows that nine out of ten participants cite these core beliefs when describing what it means to be a Mennonite.

Other aspects that are mentioned by the participants are historical references (n=7), and other cultural references such as food, music, and dress (n=8). The literature review suggests that being Mennonite is a “social context” (Liechty, 2008, p. 41). The attention to cultural aspects such as food, music and dress, discovered in the findings is concurrent with research found in the literature review. The literature review mentions historical references insofar as it talks about the historical roots of the core beliefs of

Mennonites. The participants spoke more to the notion of a personal and familial link to the history of the church with comments such as, “My family is Mennonite at least fifteen generations back.”

As referenced in the literature review, the official Mennonite Church USA website boasts of “an openness to all” as a defining factor of the Mennonite Church. Interestingly, no participants mentioned this as a defining factor of the larger Mennonite Church. Eight participants do cite the ability to find pockets of openness, in regards to GLB people, in liberal Mennonite circles. However, as mentioned in the findings, five participants felt direct discrimination from the larger church structure, including being fired from a job with the church and being excluded from a Mennonite theological institution.

All participants clearly feel that the larger church is not an open space for those who identify as GLB. This concurs with the literature found that references the U.S. Mennonite Church’s official stance on homosexuality, which likens it to other sexual sins, such as adultery. Many participants feel dissonance when the church identifies with mores around openness and inclusion, yet excludes people who are non-celibate, GLB identified. Participant # 1 says poignantly:

As soon as somebody asks me: “Oh, you’re part of a Church. Well, so tell me about how they react to your being gay.” And it’s not a positive answer I can give the larger Mennonite Church. I think that lack of faithfulness, that lack of consistency, has to be damaging for the larger Church and their witness.

This participant acknowledges the dissonance that exists with in the church’s identity. However, like seven other participants, he is able to reconcile his own personal Mennonite identity by being a member of an open and affirming Mennonite church.

Messages About Sexuality from the Church

The literature found on messages about sexuality nuances the responses given by participants. Eight participants report that they do not remember hearing explicit messages about sexuality. The two participants, who did feel that they received explicit messages, were coming of age during or after the church became doctrinal on this issue. As cited in the literature review, the church's official statement is not very open and affirming of GLB people. This message was clearly conveyed to the participants who saw that people and entire churches could be punished or kicked out of the larger church structure because of issues around GLB identities.

The literature review also makes note of the possible "love the sinner, hate the sin mentality" found in the hierarchical ideology of the Mennonite church. This message is clear when looking at the Church's official statement shared in the introduction chapter. Only one participant (Participant # 4) says this message was clearly conveyed, by his youth pastor, who claimed to be able to help people with "homosexuality problems." Participant # 7 does not remember an explicit message but did categorize his homosexual feelings as a problem rather than an aspect of his identity.

Many participants (n=8) did not feel as if they received any explicit messages from the church about sex and sexuality. However, four participants do remember having a distinct knowledge that being GLB was "bad" "evil" or "sinful." This leads to the question, "What messages are conveyed when a topic is not talked about?" and "What does silence mean?" For most participants it conveyed that being GLB was simply not an option. It did not fit in the paradigm of being Mennonite as Participant # 10 reflects:

The assumption was heterosexual. It wasn't talked about very much. And I just don't remember ever them talking about sexuality and sex. I remember the assumption being heterosexual.

More literature could be have been cited to discuss the effect silence and lack of role models has on GLB people. This research shows there was a profound effect.

Coming Out

The literature review for this study touches on the possible effects negative messages about homosexuality have on GLB Mennonites. The negative effects include, shame, depression and suicidal ideation (Liddle & Schuck, 2001). The connection between negative messages and negative mental health effects as well as the effects of implicit messages is seen in the coming out experiences of these ten participants. Eight participants talk about having indications of their sexuality in childhood and adolescents prior to accepting a GLB identity. However, for people who came out prior to the church's official statement on homosexuality (n=6), most (n=5) could only see these indications in retrospect. The three participants who came out after or during the church's official statement all had recognition that they had homosexual feelings at the time the feelings occurred in childhood. One participant, who was also able to name his homosexual feeling during childhood, knew what homosexuality was from secretly reading a book.

For the participants who did not have a name for their feelings, this resulted in a profound denial of their sexual identity. All of these participants did not come out even to themselves until their mid to late twenties. The participants who did have a name for their feelings came out to themselves in their teens. Interestingly, it was the participants who came of age later, that evidenced more of the negative effects such as shame,

depression, and suicidality. For the older participants, most struggled with the results of telling their families and church communities, but perhaps a little less internally during childhood and adolescents.

Erikson's (1980) stages of identity development were examined to help make meaning of these research results. Three participants mention having a great awareness of their homosexual feelings in adolescents. In Erikson's (1980) model, this is the stage that is about role confusion vs. identity formation. In other words, adolescents are usually trying out different roles during this time in the hopes of forming a strong sense of identity and where one fits in the world. If an adolescent is aware of what being GLB is and is aware of their same-sex attraction, but being GLB is framed with negative and shaming messages, then their identity could be tied to shame. It is possible that the participants who came out later in life, avoided overtly shaming messages about GLB people were able to have a profound and protective denial during the adolescent stage of development. However, more research could be done look at the effects of this profound denial on aspects such as self-awareness.

Impact of Being Mennonite on Being GLB

It is especially important that the shaming messages have been coming from the church in the context of this research. As referenced in the literature review, Yarhouse (2001) believes happiness and self-acceptance are influenced by whether or not a person is able to synthesize parts of their identity with their, "broader valuative framework" (p. 331). The responses by the participants clearly indicate that their valuative framework came from the church, insofar as the Mennonite church represents how one should be in the world. The strong identifying factor of growing up Mennonite and seeing that the

church did not approve of GLB people, accounts for some of the cognitive dissonance experienced by the participants. Ten participants feel that being a Mennonite had a negative impact on themselves as GLB people including low self-esteem and being directly discriminated against. These negative impacts are partially a result of the implicit and explicitly shaming messages delivered by the Mennonite church, as this research shows.

One potential finding of this research is that sexual identity may be just as pervasive as religious and cultural identity. The literature review cites Yarhouse (2001) who says, "For many persons, religion is a cultural and social expression that is secondary to sexual identity" (p. 336). Participant # 2 may disagree with Yarhouse as he says, "I knew I was Mennonite before I knew I was gay." However, when looking closely at the narrative of this participant he can note indications of being gay in childhood. However, he did not have a name for these indications like he had a name for his Mennonite identity. The research for this study indicates that both sexual identity and Mennonite identity are two of the strongest identifying factors for GLB Mennonites. Questions around integration and healing are especially important for these participants because two of their strongest identifying factors are in conflict, at least at a political level.

Integration and Healing

When participants were asked about the impact of being Mennonite on being GLB, ten people commented on negative impacts, but nine out of the ten participants also made a point to mention positive experiences. These positive experiences have been a major factor in the integration and healing of these people. The literature review cites a

2005 study done by Lease, Horn and Nofzinger-Frazier on affirming faith experiences of GLB people. One of the major findings of this study is that affirming faith communities have the ability to heal harmful faith experiences in the past. This is true for nine out of the ten participants of this study, who found affirming faith communities. Eight participants found an affirming faith community with in the Mennonite Church context. The findings chapter details the healing experience of having an affirming faith community. Participant # 1 captures this sentiment when he says:

Well I think in some ways it's a kind of priceless gift to have a worshiping community where I think of myself as a single person that comes in a consistent package.

This participant is clearly stating the integration that was able to occur by attending an affirming Mennonite Church.

The literature review makes note of the voices of dissent that are coming out against the Church's official statement on homosexuality. Participants in this study mention these voices and organizations as sources of hope and healing. Five participants talk about the re-claiming of a Mennonite identity that includes their GLB identities, as being crucial to their healing. The presence of groups such as Pink Menno, who advocate for the full inclusion of GLB Mennonites, has helped to aid in the claiming of a GLB Mennonite identity. Four participants also mention taking action to self-advocate has also been a part of their healing process. These Mennonite organizations have also given participants a place to have their voices heard and affirmed.

Bender (2001) is referenced in the literature review noting the importance of hearing the stories of GLB people in order to gain a greater understanding of same-sex intimacy. At least one participant in the study takes this idea to heart as he has engaged

in many conversations with people who do not agree with “his lifestyle.” He tells a story of inviting and a very opposing and seemingly homophobic pastor to stay at his house for a weekend. Participant # 7 reports that this pastor has not been vocally opposed to GLB people in the church, since that time. He names these experiences of sharing and helping to change hearts and minds, as part of his personal healing. Other participants do not choose to put themselves in that vulnerable position, but feel that they receive their healing by having a safe space in their affirming congregations.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

All participants were asked about their experiences in therapy. The findings show that only two participants sought therapy in their process. The two who experienced therapy, both made note that their therapists did not have a great understanding of what it means to be raised in the Mennonite Church and community. This has implications for the field of clinical social work. As a therapist, it is impossible to have expert knowledge on every religious tradition. Social work clinicians can come from the perspective of not knowing in terms of asking questions, while having the awareness of the important factor that a religion like Mennonite can have in one’s process. Many clinicians have an awareness of the religious components for GLB people, such as overtly shaming messages, but may not have an awareness of the pervasiveness of a Mennonite identity. The conflicting nature of being GLB and Mennonite must be talked about with great care and attention. If a client were to give up their Mennonite identity to accept their GLB identity, they would be giving up family, culture and a whole community. As many participants shared the choice between being Mennonite and being GLB is an impossible

one. Even having an affirming faith community that is not Mennonite may leave one with a huge void and sense of loss.

Social Workers should look at this research through the frame of policy and activism. The social work code of ethics states a commitment to the rights of all minority groups including GLB people and is committed to the advocacy of these people. Those in the social work profession must examine what biases they are bringing about GLB people. One suggestion would be to require classes on GLB identity and experiences as a degree requirement. The NASW must commit to only providing classes with affirming messages. This study illustrates that any environment that is less than affirming of a GLB identity can be greatly damaging to an individual. The NASW must continue to back all policies that seek equal rights and inclusion of GLB people. It must be an organization that conveys safety and affirmation for GLB people in a society where so many shaming and discriminatory messages are still present. The mental health effects are stark and bleak for GLB people who struggle to find affirming messages.

Limitations and Recommendations

This studies main limitation was the small sample size and method of recruitment. This researcher was committed to face-to-face interviews and did not have the funding to travel to various regions. This led to a lack of regional diversity in the sample size. Another limitation is that most the participants were recruited from an extremely open and affirming Mennonite Church. This study is missing opinions and perspectives from those who are still attending less than affirming churches. This sample also lacked racial and gender diversity. There was a bit of diversity in the age range and themes between generations did show. However, only two participants were under the age of thirty.

This researcher's bias includes being a member of the sample population. The researcher was born and raised in the Mennonite church and came to identify as a lesbian. This included a process of dealing with her identity issues, integration and healing. It is important to note that the researcher was listening, analyzing, and synthesizing the interviews through her lens and experience. The topic of this project tends to evoke strong emotions in both the researcher and participant. Special care was taken to not ask leading questions that pertained to the researcher's personal experience.

The research questions required a level of vulnerability in the participants. It is possible that the participants were not entirely honest in their responses are steered away from sharing vulnerable and painful information. Nine out the ten participants had at least ten years of being open about their sexual identity. Some of the older participants noted that they were looking at their coming out experiences from a distance and they may have forgotten pertinent information. It is likely that all participants answered questions as honestly that they could, as they all volunteered to participant in this study.

Future studies should include a larger sample size with more diversity in regards to gender, race, regions of the country, and age. Participants should be given more structure in what it means to talk about identity and identity development. Being that this was an exploratory study, qualitative research was appropriate. However, future research might include quantitative research instruments, such as the internalized shame scale. This would help to mediate some of the researcher bias that may have existed through using a qualitative approach. Another suggestion for future research would be to look especially, at a cross-section of different religions that are more communally focused. The findings in this study should encourage social workers to be aware of their biases and

opinions when working with diverse populations, especially those who have had experiences in the margins of mainstream society.

References

- Bender, T. (2001). *How I Learned to Appreciate the Bible Again: Implications for Gay Intimacy Among Church Members*. Welcome to the Dialogue Series 1:1
- Cass, V.C. (1979). *Homosexual Identity Formation: A theoretical model*. Journal Of Homosexuality. 4: 219-235.
- Dunkel, C & Sefcek, J. (2009). *Eriksonian Lifespan Theory and Life History theory: An Integration using the example of identity formation*. Review of General Psychology. 13:1.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle: A Reissue*. New York: Norton.
- Galatzer-Levy, R & Cohler, B. (2002) *Making a Gay Identity: Coming Out, Social Context, and Psychodynamics*. The Annual of Psychoanalysis. 30 255-286.
- Kaufman, G. (1974). *The Meaning of Shame: Toward A Self-Affirming Identity*. Journal of Counseling Psychology. 21: 6.
- Kolden, Marc. (1999) *Rules for Talking About a Difficult Issue*. Conciliation Quarterly 3:5.
- Lambeth Conference. (1998). Section I. Retrieved August 1, 2009, from <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/lambeth/1/sect1rpt.html>
- Liechty, J. (2008). *The Influence of Community Upon the Development of Self: An Exploratory Study*. Smith College Studies in Social Work. 78(1).
- Lease, S. Horne, S. Noffsinger-Frazier, N. *Affirming Faith Experiences and Psychological Health for Caucasian Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Individuals*. Journal of Counseling and Psychology. 52 (3).
- Liddle, B & Schuck, K. (2001). *Religious Conflicts Experienced by Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals*. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy. 5(2).
- Mennonite Church Official Website. Retrieved August 1, 2009, from <http://www.mennoniteusa.org>
- Mennonite Church Historical Committee. (1987) "A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality, 1987."

- <http://www.mcusa-archives.org/library/resolutions/humansexuality.html>
- Mennonite Church Historical Committee. (1986). "Resolution on Human Sexuality, 1986."
<http://www.mcusa-archives.org/library/resolutiononhumansexuality>
- Mennonite Church USA. "Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA."
http://mennonitechurchusa.org/doc_files/membership_guidelines.pdf
- National Association of Social Workers. (1996). *Code of Ethics* [Brochure]. Washington, DC: Author.
- Open Letter to the Mennonite Church (2009). Retrieved June 18, 2010 from, <http://www.openlettertomcusa.org>.
- Pink Menno (2009). <http://pinkmenno.org>
- Schrag, J. (2009). *Open Letter Response*. Retrieved June, 2010 from, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/about/schrag-letter-response/schrag-letter>.
- Schrock-Shenk, C. (2006). Professor of Peace Justice and Conflict Studies. Interview by Author, March 27. Goshen. Manuscript. Goshen College. Goshen, Indiana.
- Shachter, E. (2002). *Identity Constraints: The Perceived Structural Requirements of a 'Good' Identity*. Human Development. 45.
- Wells, B and Downing, N. (2003) *Lesbian Shame: It's Relationship to Identity Integration and Attachment*. Journal of Homosexuality. 45 (1).
- Yarhouse, M. (2001). *Sexual Identity Development: The Influence of Valiative Frameworks on Identity Synthesis*. Psychotherapy. 38 (3).

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your self-identified race?
4. What is your identified socio-economic status?
5. What is your self-identified sexual orientation?

Interview Questions:

6. Did you grow up in a rural or urban church?
7. Can you talk about your identity as a Mennonite?
8. Can you talk about how you define your gay/lesbian/bisexual identity?
9. What is your experience of being gay/lesbian/bisexual and growing up in the Mennonite Church?
10. In what ways have being Mennonite contributed to your coming out process?
11. Have you ever felt your religious/Mennonite identity to be in conflict with your sexual orientation identity?
12. How was sexuality talked about in your church growing up?
13. What messages did you receive from your church about being gay/lesbian/bisexual when you were growing up?
14. How has being part of the Mennonite Church impacted your feelings about yourself as a GLB person?
15. What messages are you hearing now about being gay/lesbian/bisexual from the Church?
16. At any point during your process did you decide to leave the church? Why or why not?
17. Did you ever seek out therapy during your process because of difficulties around coming out? If so did you talk about your Mennonite identity in therapy?
18. Is there anything else that you would like to speak about that I did not cover in the interview?

Appendix B

Church Announcement

Adele Liechty is looking for participants for her Master's Thesis "Experiences of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Mennonites." for the Smith College School for Social Work.

To participate you must:

Identify as either Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual

Be over 18 years of age

Have been raised in the US Mennonite Church

Please contact XXXXXXXXXXXX if you are interested.

Appendix C
HSR Approval Letter

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Appendix D
Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Adele Liechty. I am a 2010 Masters degree candidate from Smith College School for Social Work. Thank you in advance for your interest in this qualitative research study. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience and identity development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people raised in the U.S. Mennonite Church. The data collected will be used in a presentation to disseminate my thesis.

Your participation would simply include an interview, which should last about one hour. In the interview you will be answering some demographic questions as well as some open-ended questions about being GLB and growing up in the Mennonite church. You are invited to participate in this interview if you identify as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person, have grown up in the Mennonite Church and are over the age of 18.

Some questions may bring up uncomfortable feelings for some people participating in the interview. You are able to decline answering any questions or decide to discontinue the interview if any of the questions illicit too much discomfort. I will provide every participant with a list of resources available for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Mennonites for any additional support.

Your participation in this project could potentially benefit yourself and others since sharing your experience may increase other's understanding of what it means to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual and grow up in the Mennonite Church. It also may be personally beneficial to share your story. No money will be provided for participating in the interview.

Your identity will be kept confidential. Your responses will be tape-recorded and will not identify you by name. I will transcribe the interviews into written form. The transcriptions will then be used as data for my thesis. Data from the interview will be discussed as a whole in any potential publications and presentations. Quotes and vignettes will be disguised. Only my thesis advisor and I will view the transcribed interview. All data associated with this survey will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by federal guidelines and data stored electronically will be protected. If I need the materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Thank you very much for your interest. Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may withdraw from the interview at any point during the process and also can refuse to answer any questions. There will be no identifying information in the thesis that will connect you to your responses. You are free to withdraw from the study any time before March 15, 2010. You can withdrawal by contacting the interviewer by email or phone. If you choose to withdraw, all interview materials and recording will be

immediately destroyed. If you have any questions about the interview process, you can contact me at XXXXXXXX. If you have any concerns about the interview, you may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee at Smith College School for Social Work at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Adele Liechty

Please keep a copy of the consent for your records.

Appendix E

Mental Health Resources

1. Pink Menno Campaign: <http://www.pinkmenno.org/>

Pink Menno supports the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in marriage, in ordination, and in the loving community of Christian fellowship within the Mennonite Church. Pink Menno envisions the day when it becomes irrelevant because the church is fully living out Christ's radical love toward all people, especially toward those in the margins.

2. Brethren Mennonite Council for GLBT interests <http://www.bmclbgt.org>

The mission of BMC is to cultivate an inclusive church and society and to care for the Mennonite and Brethren lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied community.

3. The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. <http://www.clgs.org/>

A department of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. The Center serves three distinct but overlapping constituencies: the world of academic religious scholarship; faith communities; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and organizations.

4. New Leaf Counseling Center. <http://www.newleafservices.org/> - 415-626-7000

The nonprofit multi-purpose counseling center for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities of San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area.

5. The Pacific Center. <http://www.pacificcenter.org/> -510-548-8283

The Pacific Center is an award winning, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community center based in Berkeley, CA serving the East Bay and Greater Bay Area. Through professional counseling, groups, community events, and advocacy, Pacific Center works to foster and enhance the well-being and self-respect of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals.

Appendix F

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study and the hypotheses being tested are also confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Adele Liechty, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Adele Liechty, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

_____ Signature

_____ Date

_____ Adele Liechty

_____ Date

