



# “I Just Wanted Support”: Examining How LDS Clergy May Effectively Minister to Sexual and Gender Minority Congregants

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Received: 28 June 2022 / Accepted: 15 September 2022 / Published online: 31 October 2022  
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## Abstract

This study explored why members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) who identify as sexual or gender minorities (SGM) speak with clergy regarding their SGM identities, as well as what LDS SGMs find helpful and unhelpful in these conversations. A sample of 25 current or former LDS SGMs participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants reported six overarching reasons for talking with clergy, including church procedures, seeking guidance, seeking emotional comfort, seeking repentance, seeking openness, and other people’s initiation. Participants reported several ways clergy were helpful, including empathic listening, openness, and affirmative spiritual care. Participants further reported several ways clergy were unhelpful, including punishing, lacking empathic listening, having a limited worldview, and pathologizing. Clergy may benefit from understanding why LDS SGMs are speaking with them, and from utilizing helpful approaches such as empathic listening skills in their ministering efforts.

**Keywords** LGBTQ · LDS · religion · thematic analysis · clergy

Of the more than nine million lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) Americans, nearly half consider themselves Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015). Included in the LGBTQ+ acronym are sexual minorities—individuals who experience some degree of same-sex attraction, behavior, or identity (Lefevor et

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al. 2022)—and gender minorities—individuals who identify with a gender different than the sex they were assigned at birth (Stryker 2008). Religious sexual and gender minorities (SGM) often face significant stress due to conflicts between their sexual/gender and religious identities. SGMs experience a decrease in physical health (Hafeez et al. 2017), mental health (Lefevor et al. 2021), and an increase in suicidality (McGraw et al. 2020) compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. More specifically, Christian SGMs often face additional stress not faced by nonreligious SGMs due to discrimination and prejudice within religious environments (e.g., Lefevor et al. 2021; MASKED FOR REVIEW).

Given the difficulties that Christian SGMs face, they often seek out clergy for emotional and ecclesiastical support in times of stress (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Christian SGMs may seek support from clergy for general life stressors such as losing a job (Jacobsen and Wright 2014), as well as for support for stressors related to their sexual and/or gender identities (e.g., coming out concerns, experiences of discrimination) and theologically-based stressors (e.g., faith crises, making relationship decisions within theological constraints).

Both clergy and the congregations vary in how they attend to the needs of Christian SGMs (e.g., Whitehead, 2017). Christian clergy are often underprepared to provide support and counsel for SGM congregants that are specific to their life circumstances and needs (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). It may be that some clergy lack knowledge of SGM experiences. Alternatively, other Christian clergy may feel underprepared for conversations with SGMs due to doctrinal stances on same-sex sexuality and gender expression (Olson and Cadge 2002; Whitehead, 2017). Despite these obstacles, many clergy desire to support and minister to SGM congregants (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008).

The ways in which clergy respond to SGM congregants often depends on doctrine and policies surrounding SGMs. Some clergy and congregations embrace SGM congregants as full-fledged members of the congregation, enabling them to both participate and lead the congregation if they follow the same guidelines as heterosexual and cisgender congregants (Chaves and Anderson 2008). Such congregations often also create official written statements that welcome SGM individuals to participate. SGMs who engage in religions such as these may feel more comfortable authentically participating in religion and with fellow congregants, which can provide clergy with additional opportunities to understand the experiences of SGMs (Lease et al. 2005). Clergy who minister in these kinds of congregational contexts often experience relatively fewer difficulties in understanding how to minister to their SGM congregants.

Alternatively, not all congregations who want to support SGMs feel that they can authentically embrace SGM congregants as full-fledged members (Barnes 2013). Such congregations are more likely to be considered theologically conservative (e.g., Southern Baptist, Latter-day Saint [LDS]/“Mormon”, Jehovah’s Witness). In more conservative Christian congregations, clergy and congregants typically distinguish between experiencing same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria and engaging in same-sex sexual behavior or gender expression outside of assigned birth sex (Hoffarth and Jost 2017). Although compassion is often taught and advocated for, clergy may focus predominantly on discouraging same-sex sexual behaviors and gender expansive expression when counseling SGM congregants. Clergy in these congregations may

struggle with knowing how to support SGM members given theological constraints. Often, clergy sympathize with the plight of SGM congregants but feel unsure of how they can effectively minister to these individuals (Barnes 2013; Cadge and Wildeman 2008). One cause of this may be a lack of resources either within the religion or within the scientific community at large that speaks to how clergy can effectively minister to Christian SGMs in a way that fits within their religious framework.

Difficulties in understanding how to counsel and guide SGM congregants may be particularly pronounced in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS), a historically conservative Christian faith that espouses beliefs and doctrines regarding the essentiality of heterosexual marriage and traditional gender roles (CJCLDS, 2005). Members of the CJCLDS (Latter-day Saint; LDS) are taught that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and essential for achieving the highest degree of exaltation in the afterlife. As such, LDS SGMs, alongside other church members, are expected to abstain from any sexual practices outside of marriage between a man and a woman. The CJCLDS further espouses that gender is a divine characteristic of eternal identity and purpose (CJCLDS, 2005). Resulting from these beliefs, the CJCLDS discourages same-sex relationships and gender transitions, seeing them as in opposition to God’s plan and thus restricting members who do not keep to these doctrines.

Given the CJCLDS’s strong stance regarding same-sex sexuality and gender expression, LDS clergy often find themselves in a complicated position of being called to enforce church stances while simultaneously “[mourning] with those that mourn...and [comforting] those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9, Book of Mormon). The CJCLDS has a lay leadership, with a bishop presiding over one congregation (known as a “ward”) and a stake president presiding over approximately 6–12 congregations (known as a “stake”). LDS members may also choose to go on a proselyting or service mission for the religion, with a mission president who presides over all of the missionaries within a specific mission region. The CJCLDS does not currently provide formal training to guide bishops, stake presidents, or mission presidents in ministering to LDS SGMs, leading to clergy relying on their own experiences and thoughts. More specifically, LDS clergy are often unaware of the circumstances that typically lead LDS SGMs to speak with clergy, as well as what LDS SGMs view as beneficial and detrimental in their interactions with clergy. Elucidating the experiences of LDS SGMs’ interactions with clergy is incumbent to provide clergy with much-needed guidance and perspective in providing care for this population. In turn, educating clergy may help improve the health outcomes of LDS SGMs (Lefevor et al. 2021; McGraw et al. 2020).

The present study addresses this gap of resources and knowledge about ministering to LDS SGMs through a thematic analysis of interviews with 25 SGMs who currently or previously participated in the CJCLDS. Our goals for the present study included elucidating how clergy in theologically conservative congregations can more effectively and authentically support and serve SGM congregants, as well as the consequences of such support. Given the large amount of data generated in participant interviews, we divided the results of the interviews into two manuscripts. Research questions for the present study include (1) why do LDS SGMs talk with their church leaders, and (2) what is helpful or unhelpful about interactions with

church leaders? A second manuscript (MASKED FOR REVIEW) explores the kinds of counsel given to LDS SGMs by clergy, the impacts of that counsel, and LDS SGMs' reactions to this counsel.

## Method

### Researcher's Positionality

The research team consisted of four intentionally diverse individuals in an attempt to manage biases regarding religion/spirituality, sexual identity, and gender identity. The team included a range of identities across religion (Agnostic, Catholic, LDS), race/ethnicity (Latinx, White), gender (cisgender man, cisgender woman, polygender), and sexual identity (gay, queer, heterosexual, bisexual). All members of the research team uphold the American Psychological Association's (APA) position regarding respecting religious practices and working with LGBTQ individuals (APA, 2009; Pargament 2013).

### Participants and Procedures

Study procedures were approved by the [MASKED FOR REVIEW] institutional review board. Participants were recruited from April to June of 2021. Participants were primarily solicited through a comprehensive community sampling approach. Solicitations were posted in relevant Facebook groups (see Appendix A). Further, participants who had previously engaged with the research team and who were interested in being part of future research were contacted with a new solicitation. Participants were informed that they were being asked to be part of a 30-minute interview and were asked to complete a screener survey requesting demographic information about their age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and current religious activity. Over 500 individuals filled out this initial screener survey. From this group of volunteers, we purposefully selected 25 individuals with diverse demographic identities, intentionally selecting participants with differing ages, gender and sexual identities, church status, and race/ethnicities to ensure diverse representation across the sample. Participants completed the 30-minute interview and were compensated for their time (\$25/participant). See Table 1 for a complete list of participant demographics.

Interviews were conducted following best practices for phenomenological research, including emphasizing the importance of keeping an open attitude and evoking detailed descriptions of phenomenon that captures the complexity of lived experience (Wertz, 2005). The first author used an eight-question semi-structured interview guide to structure interviews while allowing for follow-up questions (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom due to COVID-19 concerns, allowing the researchers to interview individuals from across the United States. Interviews were then transcribed using NVivo's artificial intelligence transcription services, checked for accuracy by a member of the research team, and uploaded into NVivo electronic software for data analysis.

**Table 1** Participant demographics

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender Identity</i>	<i>Sexual Identity</i>	<i>Church Status</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>
Brenda	34	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Less Active	Hispanic/Latinx
Brian	32	Transman	Heterosexual	Excommunicated	White
Chelsea	31	Ciswoman	Pansexual	Less Active	White
Colleen	48	Ciswoman	Pansexual	Inactive	White
Collin	40	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian
Dave	26	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Eric	24	Cisman	Asexual	Less Active	White
Heather	31	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Less Active	White
Helen	21	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Inactive	White
James B.	48	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
James W.	24	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Jerry C.	59	Cisman	Gay	Active	Asian American
Jerry P.	67	Cisman	Gay	Resigned	White
Kam	22	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	White
Kate	35	Gender Nonbinary	Queer	Less Active	White
Keaton	25	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Kelly	47	Ciswoman	Bisexual	Excommunicated	White
Kuhaupio	56	Cisman	Bisexual	Active	Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian
Legrande	24	Cisman	Gay	Active	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander
Linnea	29	Genderqueer	Pansexual/Queer	Less Active	White
Philippa	30	Ciswoman	Bisexual	Less Active	White
Randall	31	Cisman	Pansexual	Excommunicated	White
Sara	34	Ciswoman	SSA	Active	White
Stanley	56	Cisman	SSA	Active	White
Tyler	29	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	White

*Note:* Participants were given the option between creating a pseudonym and using their real name; for the sake of protecting the privacy of participants who chose a pseudonym, we do not differentiate between these two groups; SSA=Same-sex attracted

## Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data as described by Braun and Clark's (2006, 2013) six-step approach. To improve the trustworthiness of findings, two independent coders, two auditors, and a systematic consensus-building process of analysis were used (Hill 2012). The coders were one graduate student and one post-bachelor's researcher. Both received training from faculty members in the analytic tasks before beginning the coding process. The coders reviewed relevant literature and other studies that employed thematic analysis in preparation for analyzing the data. The external auditors were two clinical/counseling psychology faculty members who supervised the project and analysis. Feedback was provided from both the auditors

and the coders at each stage of analysis to ensure accuracy and adherence to coding procedures.

The authors identified two main research questions that guided the analysis: Why do LDS SGMs talk with their church leaders, and what is helpful or unhelpful about interactions with church leaders? Prior to coding, each coder read the interview transcripts separately and made note of initial analytic observations. The two coders then engaged in a process of systematic data coding, identifying features of the data relevant to the broad research questions. Coders met weekly to resolve disagreements.

Thematic analysis coding often occurs at the latent and semantic level (Braun & Clark, 2006). For the present study, the coders took an inductive approach that incorporated empirical observations, seeking patterns, and drawing conclusions. Although the coders did not use a formal existing theoretical foundation to guide thematic development, existing theoretical foundations were used to help organize subthemes extracted from the data during the final stage of thematic description. The research team opted to take an essentialist approach by focusing the analysis on uncovering individuals' motivations and experiences via focusing on semantic reports in order to honor the experiences of participants (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2013; Burr 2003).

During and following the initial coding, the coders and auditors met to explore potential meaningful differences in coding completed by the two independent coders. Each coder was invited to take notes and write their reactions as they coded in order to increase awareness of potential biases that may have influenced their coding. During these meetings, themes were identified and coders then re-coded the responses to enhance coding consensus. The auditors and coders then met to finalize overarching themes and sub-themes. Following this process of review and refinement, six themes and 14 subthemes were identified for circumstances LDS SGMs speak to clergy members, and seven themes and 23 subthemes were identified for helpful and unhelpful efficacy of care by clergy members for LDS SGMs. Finally, the auditors and coders wrote the manuscript, which included selective data extracts to highlight definitions of themes.

## Results

### Why do LDS SGMs Talk with Their Church Leaders?

For research question 1, “Why do LDS SGMs talk with their church leaders?”, our analytic process led to the creation of six main themes related to circumstances that LDS SGMs speak with clergy members about their sexual and/or gender identities: church procedures, seeking guidance, seeking emotional comfort, seeking repentance, seeking openness, and because other people initiated the contact. These circumstances are presented in Table 2.

### Church Procedures

Participants most often described talking to LDS clergy about their sexual and/or gender identities as a result of church-related interviews or meetings, such as “wor-

**Table 2** Main themes, frequencies, and sub-themes of circumstances

Main Themes (frequencies)	Sub-themes
Church Procedures (15)	Church-Related Interview Disciplinary Council Early Mission Return
Seeking Guidance (14)	Seeking Guidance Couldn't Change Orientation
Seeking Emotional Comfort (6)	Seeking Emotional Comfort
Seeking Repentance (11)	Confession Guilt Felt Badly About Self
Seeking Openness (5)	Did Not Want to Conceal Identity Help Leaders Learn Wanted to Come Out to Others
Other People Initiated (6)	Others' Encouragement Suggested by Counselor Outed or Coerced

Note:  $n=25$

thiness interviews” to give individuals permission to serve a mission or go to the temple. Often these meetings include sexual and/or gender identity-based questions that clergy members routinely ask members. For example, Kelly illustrated this by saying, “My initial motivation [to speak with clergy] was because I wanted to go through the temple.” Similarly, Philippa, reported, “It was never my motivation. It was always part of worthiness interviews.” Some participants willingly brought up their sexual and/or gender identities as a part of such interviews, as was the case with Heather: “[I wanted] to make sure I was OK with God, that I was still worthy to go to the temple.”

Participants also described experiences of talking to clergy about their sexual and/or gender identities as the result of a disciplinary council, which includes a meeting with various clergy to determine if a church member who is not living in accordance with church standards may need punishment such as loss of church membership. Colleen described her experience of talking about her sexual identity with clergy by noting, “I actually got called in rather than setting it up. . we had the whole having to work through all that disciplinary council.” Brian also recounted speaking to clergy due to a disciplinary council resulting from his gender transition: “[The church handbook] at the time said if you transition physically then you are subject to a disciplinary council. So that’s why we had to have a disciplinary council.” Finally, two participants mentioned experiences of talking with clergy because they returned early from a proselyting mission. One participant, Kam, described the experience by saying, “We came to the conclusion that I should come home. And then I talked to my bishop, and it was not fun.”

### Seeking Guidance

In addition to church procedures, participants described speaking to clergy to seek guidance in navigating their religious and sexual and/or gender identities. This guidance-seeking manifested in a variety of ways. Some participants sought guidance

about how to reconcile their different identities, such as Chelsea, who said, “I don’t know how to reconcile these two parts of me: my faith and my sexuality. I didn’t go to him to confess, I just wanted somebody, a religious leader, I could talk through this with.” Other participants were looking for more general guidance, such as Collin: “I just asked him what his advice was. I asked did he have any impressions of what I should or shouldn’t do.” Sara further demonstrated seeking guidance by saying, “I didn’t know what to do with what I was feeling and thinking and doing, so I just went [to my bishop] for advice.” Other participants were seeking guidance for concerns other than their sexual and/or gender identities, which led to a conversation regarding their identities. For example, Keaton noted, “I was mostly just trying to seek help for [stopping a] pornography habit and that’s how it started.” Some participants reported seeking guidance from clergy because of cultural pressure to talk with church leaders, such as Dave: “When you’re struggling with spirituality, bishops are who we’re taught in the church to go to. . . and I feel for me that’s been important—to have a spiritual leader to do things with.” Finally, a few participants reported seeking guidance from clergy because they could not change their sexual or gender identity. Brian illustrated this sub-theme by saying the following to clergy: “I want to fix myself and figure out what’s going on.”

### Seeking Emotional Comfort

Similar to seeking guidance from clergy, LDS SGMs reported talking with clergy about their sexual and/or gender identities as a means of seeking emotional comfort. Often, seeking emotional comfort was reported alongside other circumstances, as illustrated by James, who said, “There have just been moments where I felt like I need to talk to someone about it. I guess sometimes for ecclesiastical reasons, sometimes I guess for emotional support reasons.” Several participants discussed wanting to have somebody to talk to who would support them, such as with James B.: “A couple of times I just wanted support. Here’s what I’m dealing with. I would like you to know or would like to have some support.” Other participants were seeking comfort from the distress or loneliness that accompanied their intersecting sexual, gender, and religious identities. Brenda illustrated this by saying, “I [talked] to one other bishop just when I was struggling dealing with coming to terms with my sexuality more. I just wanted support because I felt really alone and didn’t know how to do this.”

### Seeking Repentance

LDS SGMs in the study described speaking to LDS clergy as part of a repentance process. This approach typically manifested as confessing to clergy to ease feelings of guilt related to being attracted to the same-sex, desires for free gender expression, or shame associated with doing actions that are not permitted in the CJCLDS. When asked about motivations for speaking with clergy, James B. reported, “Honestly, probably fear initially. Guilt. Those types of things would be motivating me. Wanting to make sure that I was ok or my standing in the church would be ok.” Another participant, Colleen, said, “I was very filled with shame at the time. I was so ashamed of myself, and I was willing to believe and do everything that [my bishop] would say.”



Some participants did not directly report feelings of guilt but instead noted that they wanted to live more authentically and saw confession as a precursor to this. Stanley illustrated this by saying, “I had a [same-sex sexual] encounter. . so I thought I just got to come clean. So, I came home, told my wife, met with my bishop, and then worked through it.” Kuhaupio further demonstrated a desire to confess when he said, “I talked to my bishop. . because of an experience I had acting on my attraction.” However, other participants spoke with clergy so they could continue to engage fully with the religion. This was typically reported alongside a belief that not talking to clergy was not an option, as illustrated by Heather: “I felt like I had to go in and talk to them because that’s what you’ve been told your whole life. You go to your bishop to confess these more serious things and they’re there to help you get right with God.”

### Seeking Openness

Participants reported that they also spoke with clergy because they wanted to be open regarding their sexual and/or gender identities. Sometimes this openness manifested as wanting to avoid concealment and instead increase authenticity with their church leaders, as illustrated by Kelly: “I never wanted to be dishonest.” Additionally, Jerry C. said, “I felt that if the gospel of Jesus Christ is about being honest, you need to be honest with yourself. You should be honest with the people around you, whether it’s other members at church or leaders.” Some participants saw such openness about their identity as a way to progress and improve. Such was the case with Randall, who said, “I wanted it out there. I felt burdened with it; [. . . I wanted to] acknowledge that there was something going on so that I could move forward with my life.” Participants also included that they wanted to be open with their church leaders in an effort to help the leaders learn. For example, Legrande reported that he told his bishop, “This can be a learning experience for both you and I on how to navigate and negotiate this.” Finally, participants sought openness by talking with clergy as part of a larger coming out process. For example, Linnea told their bishop, “I feel like I need to be out, I need to be public about my situation in the church, and that I am still a member.”

### Other People Initiated

Finally, LDS SGMs spoke to clergy because they were encouraged by others to speak with their church leaders regarding their sexual and/or gender identities. Kam demonstrated this by saying, “Honestly, I was just talking to the bishop for my mom.” In addition to others’ encouragement, some participants were encouraged to speak with church leaders by a counselor or therapist. For example, James W. reported, “The first person I ever talked to about [my sexuality] was my mission president, and it was because I had an experience with a psychologist. . and realized I need to talk about this because I need to go home.” Finally, some participants spoke with clergy regarding their sexual and/or gender identities because they were outed or coerced to by others. Colleen illustrated this circumstance by sharing, “I actually got called in rather than setting that up. My ex-girlfriend came out to the bishop, so then I got called in.” Similarly, Jerry P. reported, “I finally came out to [my wife]. . She imme-

**Table 3** Main themes, frequencies, and sub-themes of helpful and unhelpful efficacy of care

Type of Efficacy	Main Themes (frequencies)	Sub-themes
Helpful	Empathic Listening (18)	Understanding Compassion Validation Listening
Helpful	Affirmative Spiritual Care (11)	Avoiding Condemnation Protection Advocacy Spiritual Affirmation of Identity
Helpful	Openness (9)	Honesty Asking Questions Space to Explore
Unhelpful	Punishing (14)	Punishment Shame Prying Questions Marginalized
Unhelpful	Lack of Empathic Listening (11)	Invalidating
Unhelpful	Limited Worldview (9)	Insincere Black and White Outlook Heteronormativity Homonegativity
Unhelpful	Pathologizing (7)	Treating as Sick Judging Trying to Fix

Note:  $n=25$

diately called the stake president that night, and then the next night I was in the stake president's office.”

### What is Helpful or Unhelpful About Interactions with Church Leaders?

For research question 2, “what is helpful or unhelpful about interactions with church leaders?”, we also examined what participants found to be helpful or unhelpful about interactions with church leaders. We identified three main themes related to helpful efficacy of care that clergy provided to LDS SGMs: empathic listening, affirmative spiritual care, and openness. We further identified four main themes related to unhelpful efficacy of care that clergy provided to LDS SGMs: punishing, lack of empathic listening, limited worldview, and pathologizing. These themes are presented in Table 3.

#### Helpful Responses

**Empathic Listening.** Participants most often described that they found it helpful when their clergy members would empathically listen to them. Empathic listening

involved several components, including listening, demonstrating understanding, showing compassion, and being validating. James W. illustrated how his bishop's approach was helpful by stating, "His approach in being understanding and kind about [my sexual identity] helped me realize I was okay." Kate, expressed, "[My bishop] was able to figure out what was going on with me, because I didn't quite know." In addition to being understanding, participants reported that it was helpful when clergy were compassionate, such as Heather, who stated, "I felt like all of [my leaders] expressed love in the way they could, so I felt like all of that was positive." Additionally, Kam illustrated a compassionate conversation with his mission president: "He said, 'You're a great missionary, you're a great person.' Nothing negative came out of his mouth. He said, 'You can go home, you can figure it out. Whatever happens, I'll always be in your corner.'" Participants reported that clergy were validating of their experiences, such as with Brian, who noted that his bishop was validating of his gender identity in the following experience: "He just asked why I wasn't going to Elder's Quorum. And I said, 'Because at my last ward I was told not to go.' And he said, 'That's preposterous. You need to go. That's where you belong.'" Validation was further illustrated by Chelsea, who said, "He just acknowledged that this is hard and not really fair, and [he was] sorry." Finally, participants reported that they found it helpful when clergy listened to them as they shared their experiences. For example, Kuhaupio said, "[My leaders] have, if anything, just listened to me." Additionally, Keaton reported, "I left the office feeling good. Feeling like they had listened, they had validated me." Taken together, LDS SGMs found that clergy who spoke to them using these empathic listening skills were helpful to them.

**Affirmative Spiritual Care.** LDS SGMs reported that they also found it helpful when clergy members used affirmative spiritual care in their interactions. We saw affirmative spiritual care as avoiding condemnation of LDS SGMs, protecting them, advocating for them, and spiritually affirming their sexual and/or gender identities. Participants most frequently noted that they found it helpful when clergy members did not condemn them for their identity, as demonstrated by Legrande, who said, "He didn't try to act like, 'Well, you're a sinner and this is what you need to be doing to be better.' He just said, 'You know I'm here for you.'" Further, Heather reported, "They didn't just condemn me because I was gay. It wasn't like I was suddenly a bad person." In addition to avoiding condemnation, participants reported that clergy were helpful to them when clergy would protect and advocate for them. Protection and advocacy were reported in a variety of ways. Sometimes clergy would explicitly state that they would protect the LDS SGM individual, such as with Kelly, whose bishop stated, "I still care about you and I want to make sure you're protected and I want the best for you." Additionally, Kate reported that their bishop told others, "Everybody back off. I'm going to protect Kate." Other times, the participant reported that they felt protected and advocated for by their clergy, as illustrated by Jerry C., who said, "My bishop has been my protector and my supporter all throughout my career at church." Finally, participants noted that they found it helpful when clergy would spiritually affirm their sexual and/or gender identities. For example, Chelsea noted that her bishop relayed the biblical story of Noah's ark and related it to her by saying, "It was so important that every animal went on board two by two. I don't think it's right to say that people shouldn't be able to live their life that way, two by two." Taken

together, avoiding condemnation, protecting, advocating, and spiritually affirming SGMs' sexual and/or gender identities were considered helpful spiritual approaches taken by clergy members. We note that this is the only theme which may be experienced by clergy as challenging to a conservative CJCLDS worldview.

**Openness.** Finally, LDS SGMs reported that they found it helpful when clergy were open with them. This openness typically manifested as clergy being honest, asking questions, and providing a safe space for LDS SGMs to explore their identities. Often LDS SGMs noted that they found interactions with their clergy helpful when clergy were honest with them, including being honest that they did not have any answers or counsel. For example, Linnea shared their bishop's response to their coming out: "He would say, 'So you're genderqueer? What is that? I don't understand.' And then I said pansexual and he asked what that was." Helen noted, "I think the bishops that honestly answered, 'I don't know' were probably the most helpful." Further, Stanley reported that his bishop "had so much love and was very upfront in saying, 'I don't get it.'" In addition to this honesty, participants found it helpful when clergy asked questions to better understand participants' situations. Keaton reported that his bishop was "willing to just be there and be present and ask questions," which he reported was "really helpful." Jerry C. further added that he found it helpful when his bishop gave him space to talk by saying, "Explain it to me." Similarly, participants found it helpful when they were given space to explore their identities with clergy. Legrande illustrated this approach by stating, "[My bishop] gave me the space to be my own person and to figure out my own life." Further, Dave mentioned that it was helpful for him to be given space to explore by saying, "[My bishop] wanted to get to know my experience and was giving me some room to figure out what I want to do. . . It was really nice for me to feel like I had a little bit of latitude there to figure things out."

### Unhelpful Responses

**Punishing.** LDS SGMs reported that there were several instances in which clergy members took approaches that were considered unhelpful for them. Primary among these approaches was clergy members punishing LDS SGMs for their sexual and/or gender identities. Punishment was typically reported as having church responsibilities or opportunities taken away from people who identify as SGMs. For example, Keaton noted a detrimental experience he had when he came out to his bishop, who "removed [my church responsibilities] from me." Collin reported a similar experience: "Now I can no longer work with any youth in the church ever again, and that was something I absolutely loved. That's why I looked forward to going to church every Sunday, so I could be with the youth." In addition to these reportedly harmful experiences, some clergy members shamed LDS SGMs who came out to them. Kam reported an instance in which he felt shamed: "When I walked into [the bishop's office], he said, 'I'm just going to tell you right now that it is really stupid for you to go down that path [of being gay], and for you to do this to your mother and father.' And I just sat there in disbelief." Similarly, Brian reported, "I wanted to go to Elder's quorum. . . and my bishop said, 'Well, you can't go to Elder's quorum because it would make other people uncomfortable.'" Further, Philippa shared an experience

with a bishop that occurred in public: “Out of two or three hundred people, he looked directly at me and said, ‘Look, I know you’re a sinner, but I hate the sin, not you.’” In addition to shaming, participants reported that it was unhelpful when clergy asked them prying questions. This differed from the helpful questions that clergy asked in that these questions were inherently personal and often sexual in nature. For example, Randall reported, “[My bishop] made me retell every activity that I did with this guy.” Further, Tyler told an experience of speaking to his bishop in which he stated, “[My bishop] said, ‘Let’s look at your actions; have you done anything with anyone?’” In these cases, the participants noted that they were made uncomfortable by the questions. Although mentioned less often, some participants included that they were punished by their clergy members by being marginalized, gaslit, attacked, or exposed/outed to others.

**Lack of Empathic Listening.** When clergy lacked empathic listening approaches, LDS SGMs reported interactions as unhelpful and hurtful. Lack of empathic listening largely included invalidating statements made by clergy members. For example, Colleen reported that her bishop told her, “Oh, you are just confused.” Further, Tyler reported, “[My church leaders] don’t get why it is a big deal for other [SGMs]. It’s like these leaders just don’t get it at all. I just felt an unwillingness to even want to understand.” Collin also shared an experience in which he felt invalidated by his bishop: “He said that he lived his life in such a way that he knew where he was going after this life, but he didn’t know where I was going to end up.” In addition to such invalidating comments, LDS SGMs also reported that some clergy were insincere in their approaches. Kelly reported the following instance in which she felt that her bishop was insincere in his support: “He said, ‘Oh, I’m very open and accepting.’ I felt like it was more him thinking, ‘I’m in New York, I need to be accepting, I need to show that.’ I figured that it was not sincere, and I never had deep conversations with him in general.” Insincerity and invalidation also manifested as a lack of willingness to listen, as demonstrated by Eric, who said, “The message I walked away with was that. . . there was a lot of unwillingness in the external leadership to listen.” Taken together, participants found it unhelpful when clergy members were invalidating of their experiences or were being insincere with them.

**Limited Worldview.** Participants also reported that it was unhelpful when clergy had a limited or narrow worldview. This manifested when clergy were seen as having a black and white outlook, having a heteronormative view of the world, or having feelings of homonegativity that influenced how they approached the world and other people. Heather reported that she found it unhelpful that her bishop had “a black and white nature, the way he saw things when it didn’t feel black and white.” James B. similarly shared, “I think [my church leader] doled out restrictions on people probably more so than a lot of bishops would. I just felt like his church was black and white.” Some participants further shared that clergy had a black and white outlook on specific topics, such as with Colleen, who shared, “The stake president basically shared this patriarchal ‘this is how you need to do your marriage, because this is the only pattern that will work.’” In addition to these black and white outlooks, some participants reported that their clergy had a heteronormative view of the world. Tyler shared an experience in which he had a negative experience because of such heteronormative views: “In church, in lessons where [church leaders] talk about the chastity

lessons, they would assume you are going to be attracted to girls. And I remember sitting in a room thinking, ‘Well, when’s that going to kick in?’” Often coinciding with such heteronormative views were reports that clergy members also had homonegative views. Chelsea illustrated such views when she stated, “I told [my bishop] what I told the other bishop, which was I’m still wrestling with how to reconcile my faith and my sexuality. So, he told me the world wants you to identify [your sexuality], not the church. He was basically saying being gay is not something you are, it’s something you have.” Further, Philippa shared, “It was all horrible all the time. It was constant abuse and terror and gaslighting and homophobia.” Taken together, these experiences demonstrate that LDS SGMs may find it unhelpful when their clergy members have limited worldviews.

**Pathologizing.** Finally, participants shared that they found it unhelpful when they felt pathologized by clergy because of their sexual and/or gender identities. Such pathologizing was sometimes covert, such as when clergy treated LDS SGMs as sick. Other times, the pathologizing was more overt, such as when clergy judged LDS SGMs or tried to “fix” them. Jerry C. shared an instance in which his sexual identity was treated as a sickness: “[The mission president] asked me who molested me to turn me gay. I almost shut the doors on joining the church.” Additionally, Colleen reported, “In my head and in church in general, growing up there was always that narrative of ‘this is the way it is. If you’re gay, you’re not normal.’ Things like that. So, I feel like I carried a lot of that weight and shame around.” Participants frequently reported being treated as sick alongside clergy trying to fix their sexual and/or gender identities. Helen illustrated this by saying, “[My bishop] thought that if I fix my pornography problem, the same-sex attraction would go away as well.” James B. shared, “Sometimes church leaders get simplistic, and they’re biased. ‘You need to date more. Do you need testosterone?’” Finally, Tyler reported the following instance in which his bishops tried to fix his sexual identity: “A lot of times they would focus in on, ‘This happened because the attraction’s the problem; the same-sex attraction is there because you are just a sex addict.’” Although less frequent, some participants noted that clergy would judge them more generally. For example, Brenda stated, “Looking back, being judged for my worthiness generally isn’t a great experience.”

## Discussion and Implications

Through interviews with 25 SGM who were current and former LDS, we identified several reasons that SGMs spoke with clergy. We also identified specific practices that were more and less helpful from clergy in ministering to these LDS SGMs.

### Understanding Why LDS SGMs Speak to Clergy

We found that LDS SGMs reported a variety of differing motivations for talking with clergy about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants noted that their reasons for speaking to clergy about their sexual orientation or gender identity differed, although responses fit into one of six broad categories: procedural visits, seeking guidance, seeking emotional comfort, seeking repentance, seeking openness, and

other people's initiation. LDS SGMs who have these differing reasons for interacting with clergy may be likely to differ in their desires and expectations from conversations with clergy. For example, many LDS SGMs come out to clergy for support and guidance in times of stress that may be related to their sexual and/or gender identities, religious concerns, or general life stressors (e.g., Cadge and Wildeman 2008; Jacobsen and Wright 2014). Some LDS SGMs come out to clergy seeking to repent, whereas others come out because they desire to be more open with people at large. In each of these instances, LDS SGMs approach these clergy conversations with specific expectations. Alternatively, others come out to clergy due to promptings of others, including clergy during procedural visits, in which case LDS SGMs may not have specific expectations for the visit.

Given that LDS SGMs talk with clergy about their sexual and/or gender identities for various reasons, clergy may benefit from different approaches depending on the circumstances of their conversation. Some LDS SGMs come out to clergy of their own volition, such as to seek comfort, guidance, or openness. In these circumstances, it may be beneficial for clergy to take a more hands-on approach in providing SGMs with the sought-after counsel or care. For example, we found that LDS SGMs who are seeking guidance may be most often looking for how to navigate their SGM identity and their religious identity (e.g., Dehlin et al. 2015; MASKED FOR REVIEW). Providing counsel tailored toward identity conflict and integration would likely be more beneficial with such individuals than with LDS SGMs who come out to clergy as part of routine visits or because outside people initiated the contact. Taken together, clergy may benefit from first understanding the circumstances in which LDS SGMs are approaching them regarding their sexual and/or gender identities, and providing care and counsel accordingly.

### Helpful Approaches in Ministering to LDS SGMs

We found that LDS SGMs reported several factors or approaches taken by clergy that were helpful. Many Christian clergy at large have evidenced a willingness and desire to be helpful to SGM members (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008). However, clergy are often ill-prepared to provide support and counsel for such members (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Many clergy feel deeply for SGM congregants and desire their happiness but also feel unsure of their role in ministering to these individuals (Barnes 2013; Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Highlighting approaches and actions that LDS SGMs have found helpful provides clergy with guidelines for how they can beneficially minister to LDS SGMs.

Most participants found it helpful when clergy empathically listened to them (e.g., Davis 2020; Parks 2015). Empathic listening includes actively listening, validating, and demonstrating compassion and understanding. Empathic listening skills are foundational for helping others feel seen, heard, and valid, and have also been found to be particularly beneficial when used by leaders or those in positions of power (e.g., Parks 2015). Clergy may be particularly impactful when they use empathic listening skills rather than reiterating the church's doctrines, advocating for LDS SGMs to keep commandments, or encouraging LDS SGMs to continue to engage with the religion.

We further found that LDS SGMs may find it helpful to hear honesty from clergy who do not have the answers. Such honesty can serve to enhance the relationship and increase trust between LDS SGMs and their clergy. Additionally, clergy who are honest when they do not have answers may benefit from asking sincere questions to better understand the plight of LDS SGMs, as well as using the opportunity to collaborate with such congregants and explore the topic and potential paths forward together. Clergy who approach conversations with LDS SGMs regarding sexual and/or gender identities may find that honesty and openness to exploring can create opportunities to engage more with such individuals and help them in a more hands-on manner, rather than by focusing solely on limited preexisting knowledge.

Affirmative spiritual care also emerged as a helpful approach to ministering to LDS SGMs. Affirmative spiritual care includes avoiding condemnation of SGMs and spiritually affirming individuals' identities. As opposed to other themes, affirmative spiritual care is unique in that it focuses on incorporating spirituality into clergy's ministering approach. This theme may be experienced as challenging by LDS clergy, as it may be viewed as opposing religious teachings to spiritually affirm SGM identities. For example, telling an LDS SGM that God created them as a transgender person may be viewed as contradictory to CJCLDS doctrines (CJCLDS, 2020). However, there are several ways to approach affirmative spiritual care while maintaining church standards and teachings. For example, clergy could focus on protecting and advocating for LDS SGMs against discrimination, prejudice, or violence, which is a clear and appropriate method of decreasing distress for SGMs (e.g., Meyer 2003; MASKED FOR REVIEW). Additionally, clergy can affirm LDS SGMs' sexual and/or gender identities without commenting on actions that contradict church teachings (e.g., "God loves you as you are"). Although affirmative spiritual care may be challenging for some clergy, LDS SGMs may benefit from such approaches.

### **Unhelpful Approaches in Ministering to LDS SGMs**

In addition to suggesting ways in which clergy can more helpfully minister to LDS SGMs, participants also described approaches and actions that were unhelpful or harmful. We found that LDS SGMs reported that the approach taken by clergy was unhelpful when empathic listening skills were not used, when clergy evidenced a lack of knowledge or experience with SGMs, or when clergy were punishing, judging, or pathologizing of SGMs. LDS SGMs and SGM Christians more broadly often face additional stress not faced by their less religious SGM counterparts due to discrimination and prejudice happening in places of worship (e.g., MASKED FOR REVIEW). When such prejudice or discrimination, such as judgment or punishment, come from clergy or other individuals intended to be sources of support, SGMs may experience distress. LDS SGMs noted that punishment, shame, and invalidation from clergy were both frequent and particularly harmful. However, clergy often may not view their actions as punishing or invalidating and may instead be seeing such approaches as affirming the CJCLDS's position on sexuality and gender expression. Regardless of the intention behind these actions, LDS SGMs sometimes suffer the consequences of victimization, thus increasing their feelings of stress and adversely affecting their



mental health (Meyer 2003). As such, clergy may benefit from avoiding approaches that punish, shame, or invalidate the experiences of LDS SGMs.

We observed that LDS SGMs found it unhelpful when the clergy they spoke with had limited or fixed worldviews. Clergy who exhibit more openness and willingness to learn about LGBTQ+ individuals and experiences were seen as being more supportive (Russell et al. 2021). Clergy may expand their worldview in several ways, including seeking exposure to LGBTQ+ community resources, literature, and events as well as considering alternate perspectives on SGM identities. The SGMs who they counsel may be inspired by this openness and may be more likely to be open in return. As such, LDS clergy may benefit from taking time to learn about SGMs more broadly in order to develop a framework to better minister to LDS SGMs.

Finally, we found that LDS SGMs find it unhelpful when clergy pathologize their sexual and/or gender identities. SGMs whose sexual and/or gender identities are pathologized are more likely to experience adverse mental health outcomes and attribute their mental health concerns to their orientation or gender identity (e.g. APA, 2011; Pachankis and Goldfried 2004). As such, clergy who avoid pathologizing SGM identities and are open to new and sometimes differing perspectives and worldviews may be more likely to help SGM congregants and less likely to adversely affect their mental well-being. Taken together, clergy may benefit from increasing their knowledge of SGM experiences overall, and avoiding approaches that punish, shame, invalidate, or pathologize LDS SGMs.

## Limitations

The present study was limited by several factors. Although we made efforts to recruit participants of various backgrounds and with varied views toward the CJCLDS and the LGBTQ+ community, our sample was predominantly White and younger ( $M=36.12$ ). Further, although our sample included several gender minorities, we primarily interviewed sexual minorities, and it may be that responses do not fully capture the unique experiences of LDS gender minorities. Representation of diverse perspectives is vital to more accurately understanding the experiences of LDS SGMs. Therefore, although we made attempts to sample and capture the experiences of SGMs from diverse backgrounds, further research with a more diverse sample may help better understand the experiences of LDS SGMs from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, given the qualitative nature of the present study, we cannot make claims as to how these themes may relate to one another; future studies looking more quantitatively at these relationships may elucidate how the circumstances in which LDS SGMs speak with clergy may relate to the perceived efficacy of these interactions (Skidmore & Lefevor, [under review](#)).

## Conclusion

With a sample of 25 LDS SGMs, we examined why LDS SGMs speak with clergy about their sexual orientation or gender identity, and what kinds of actions from clergy were experienced as helpful or unhelpful. We found that LDS SGMs spoke

with clergy for a variety of reasons including as part of routine church procedures, because they wanted guidance, comfort, or repentance, because they wanted to be open with leaders, and because other people initiated the conversation. We further found that LDS SGMs find it helpful when clergy listened empathically to them, were open, and engaged in affirmative spiritual care. Conversely, LDS SGMs found it unhelpful when clergy did not listen empathically, were punishing, pathologized sexual orientation or gender identity, or had a limited worldview. Clergy may benefit from understanding why SGMs are speaking with them and adapting their response according to the circumstances that brought the SGM to talk with clergy. Additionally, clergy may benefit from utilizing empathic listening skills, being open and honest regarding their knowledge and experiences, and providing affirmative counsel or care to LDS SGMs, as well as avoiding unhelpful approaches to ministering such as judging, shaming, pathologizing, or invalidating LDS SGMs' experiences.

## Appendix A

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### Online Groups Participants were Recruited from

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- Affirmation millennials group
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/affirmationmillennials>
  - Private Facebook group
- Affirmation mixed orientation families group
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/718251581557428>
  - Private Facebook group
- Active LDS Affirmation group “Prepare”
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheLordWillPrepare>
  - Private Facebook group
- Mormons Building Bridges
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mormonsbuildingbridges>
  - Public Facebook group
- Affirmation Community Conversations
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1944097702543519>
  - Private Facebook group
- USGA at BYU Facebook
  - <https://www.facebook.com/UsgaAtByu>
  - Private Facebook group
- JIM alumni
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/jimalumni>
  - Private Facebook group
- North Star main group
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NorthStarMembership>
  - Private Facebook group
- ALL Arizona LDS LGBT & Friends & Family
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ArizonaLDSSLGBT/>
  - Private Facebook group

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 Online Groups Participants were Recruited from
 

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LDS family fellowship

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/134605330021674/>

- Private Facebook group

Ex-Mormon Reddit

- <https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon>

- Public Reddit forum

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

\*Ask them to find a quieter spot if noises in background; if not, reschedule\*

“Thank you again for taking the time for this interview. I’ll be asking you eight questions regarding your experiences with talking to church leaders about your sexuality, as well as your experiences with coming out. The interview will last no longer than an hour, so there may be points where I ask us to move on to the next question for the sake of time. The things that you share today will not be shared with anybody else without your permission, so please feel comfortable to be as honest as you can. The interview is being recorded, but solely for the purpose of data collection; the video will not be shown to anybody else. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

- 1) Have you ever talked with a bishop, stake president, or mission president about your sexuality/gender?
  - a. How was it?
  - b. What motivated you to talk with a church leader about your sexuality/gender?
- 2) What kinds of counsel were you given from your bishop, stake president, or mission president around your sexuality/gender?
- 3) How helpful did you find talking with your bishop, stake president, or mission president?
- 4) Can you describe a positive experience you had with your bishop, stake president, or mission president regarding your sexuality/gender?
- 5) Can you describe a negative experience you had with your bishop, stake president, or mission president regarding your sexuality/gender?
 

**\*Notice time and adjust accordingly. Shoot for 50 min\*.**
- 6) How did your experiences with your bishop, stake president, or mission president affect your views of the church and gospel?
- 7) What advice would you share with church leaders who want to support LGBTQ members?
- 8) Did we miss anything about talking with a bishop, stake president, or mission president about your sexuality/gender?

Final question: we anticipate that we will quote some of our participants in our write up of the study’s results. If one of your responses is quoted, what name would you like us to use in association with your responses? This name may be a pseud-

onym or your given name, whichever you prefer. We are also happy to create a pseudonym for you if you prefer.

Guiding question: What are the experiences of LDS LGBTQ individuals in talking with church leaders?

**Author Acknowledgements** The authors would like to acknowledge the Louisville Institute for funding the current project via research grant. For more information on the Louisville Institute, visit <https://louisville-institute.org/>.

**Statement of Availability** Given the personal nature of narrative shared in the present study, data and other materials from the present study will be made available upon request following publication.

## Declaration

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors note no conflicts of interest for the present manuscript.

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